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JoLMA

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I – Monographic section

Translation as Interpretation

**edited by Francesco Camera
and Gian Luigi Paltrinieri**

Introduction – Translation as Interpretation

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Plato and Aristotle are not concerned with the problem of translation. When it is assumed that by nature the essence of things is immutable (Plato, *Cratylus* 438e-439e), that the meanings of things are the same for all human beings (Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 16a), and that the Greek language is but the mutable image of this ontological logos, the question of translation cannot even arise. Even the foreigner of Elea, protagonist of the *Sophist*, which establishes the method of philosophical science is, is a guest who speaks and thinks in a Greek way; indeed, he does so in a more Greek and, therefore, truer way with respect to the Athenian one. In such a context, posing the problem of translating the Hellenic language into some barbaric idiom could only have meant to wish not to be Greek and move many degrees away from the only natural truth coinciding with the Greek logos. For translation to become an issue, indeed a necessity, human beings are to experience the distance of truth and its manifestation through a forest of words to be interpreted and signs to be deciphered. Human beings are to be impacted by the opacity, heterogeneity and historicity of speech acts that bring with them disagreements and misunderstandings, as well as illuminating openings. It is therefore necessary to experience the *Faktum* that idioms are not aseptic verbal instruments to convey a single truth to be meant in the same way by everyone. Rather, idioms are language and therefore human ways of being-in-the-world; they are practical, culturally

determined behaviours within the life-world, that dialogically clash and translate each other until they encounter the boundaries of the shareable. They are, therefore, different human ways of being interpreters of the truth, the latter being divided and mutable like the languages in which it manifests itself. Translating is not an occasional task, a simple technical remedy for the accidental failure of some speakers to master a certain foreign language. Translating is a necessity, whenever the *epoché* (suspension, interruption) of the familiar meaningfulness of an idiom reveals that we experience a language and then another world, and that a specific surrounding world (the *Umwelt*, as Heidegger's *Being and Time* would have it) is but a world, indeed *the* world. Therefore, translation turns out to be a necessity as we find ourselves exposed to the estranging experience – not an exceptional but a daily one – that the language we hear, speak or read is unique, and yet permeated by the plural, definitely not an idiom closed in its own identity (Nardelli 2021, 81, 114, 117), and that the surrounding world (*Umwelt*) that is familiar to us is actually the world, and therefore something to be interpreted in different ways, incommensurable and translatable at the same time. Translatability, as Benjamin points out, is not an accidental addition to texts, on the contrary, it is inherent in them in a constitutive way: “Translatability is an essential quality of certain works” (Benjamin 1968, 71). It is “the very life of language and its works” that opens up translatability. It is because they are alive – ‘alive’ in the historical and not merely natural sense – that works ask for being translated, for unfolding themselves in renewed forms, and being transformed into their translations (Benjamin 1968, 71-3). Moreover, even the experience of the untranslatability of texts does not rule out their translatability, but, rather, calls for and demands the latter (Di Martino 2007, 69-70).

It is on the biblical side, above all Jewish, that the human experience of the Babel confusion of human languages emerges, but this condition – as Voltaire already underlines in the entry “Babel” of his *Dictionnaire philosophique* – is proper to the ‘city of God’. Indeed “Babel means God’s city (la ville de Dieu), the holy city” and therefore linguistic confusion is not only an obstacle to be remedied by mastering several languages, but also what opens up future, fruitful ways of relating to divine truth, *by translating it through our translating each other*. Should we ever – let’s put this as a mere limit concept – understand the speeches coming from the Other in a totally transparent and definitive way, all our interest, commitment, care, freedom would disappear, and with the obviousness of the evidence apathy and indifference towards the others and towards ourselves would also make their appearance. In other terms, the practice of translating is not an imperfect remedy used to cope with imperfection, but, rather, a finite response to our finitude. The phenomenon of translation, moreover, shows its existential, ethical, political, religious im-

portance, whenever writing, speaking, dialoguing is not reduced to a mere exchange of information. Besides, as Ricoeur points out, the concrete “linguistic experience” of us speakers *in the flesh* reveals the irreducibility of language to “a closed universe of signs” (Ricoeur 1974, 85) and the necessity not to assimilate equivocalness “through overabundance of meaning” “to the equivocalness through the confusion of meanings” (Ricoeur 1974, 19).

As it can be seen from the preceding rapid remarks, the section of this issue of *JoLMA* dedicated to ‘translation as interpretation’ is significantly influenced by the reflections coming from the hermeneutic-philosophical area of the twentieth century. Indeed, as Canullo points out in her essay (*infra*), one of the guiding questions sounds: what can hermeneutics explain or offer when translation is the issue at stake? However, attention is not devoted only to hermeneutic-philosophical thinkers such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur, or Derrida, but also to authors closer to the Anglophone logical-analytical tradition like Saul Kripke – whose use of translation as a test on the ambiguity of the original is investigated by Ervas –, and like Quine and his ‘radical translation’ (Canullo, Simonotti). Not surprisingly, attention to Walter Benjamin’s reflections on translation figures substantially, especially in the essays by Costa and De Villa. Precisely the latter highlights Benjamin’s explicit filiations towards the German ‘Romantic idea of translation’ and in particular his debt to Schlegel. Also significant are Benjamin’s references to authors such as Hamann and Herder who already in the second half of the eighteenth century rejected as illusory the Kantian purification of reason from linguisticity and historicity (Paltrinieri 2009, 47-60, 83-90). It is a provenance (*Herkunft*) from the German reflection between the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries also shared in common by Heidegger and Gadamer. Besides, Schleiermacher already emphasizes the exemplary nature of the practice of translation, seen as a universal human dialogue capable of bringing together strangers to each other, in a historical-cultural sense, while preserving the distance of what is being translated (Camera 2017, 435-6). Schleiermacher’s negative criticism of any translating method that only aims at adapting and assimilating ‘the source text’ so as to “‘leave the reader as much as possible in peace’”, in favour of a method in which translating is an “estranging and decentring strategy” (Camera 2017, 439, 444), maintains a fundamental import on twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics, too.

However, it should be remembered that the hermeneutic-philosophical movement is not a homogeneous block and even the essays presented here testify to how different the ‘hermeneutic-philosophical’ ways of interpreting ‘translation as interpretation’ may be. If for Heidegger “the purpose of translation by no means is that of bringing what has been said closer” (Heidegger 1991, 96), if for him dis-

tance, otherness and heterogeneity are something original, which translation is called upon to manifest, rather than unify and fill, if, as Cavazza underlines, “for Heidegger the beginning is not a condition of perfection before a decay”, Gadamer’s neo-Hegelian hermeneutics and Ricoeur’s neo-Cartesian one move according to a different orientation. As it can be seen from the contributions of Laverdure and Simonotti, for Gadamer translating is a phronetic art aimed at transforming “something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity” (Gadamer 2004, 156) – the task of a translator being therefore “the overcoming of the strangeness that obscures the understanding of a text” (Laverdure) –, and, similarly, for Ricoeur “the translator builds a bridge to connect two poles”, to mediate and reconcile, in a pluralistic sense, foreign languages and cultures (Simonotti). On the other hand Heidegger and Derrida are more interested in distinguishing unity from unification and therefore in preserving the irreducibility of translation to any form of assimilative appropriation. Still, an important underlying ground is shared in common: the practice of translating always involves an interpretation, i.e. the understanding of someone who can never be a technician *ex nihilo*, but who is always an interpreter factically ‘situated in the middle’, bound and opened by multiple linguistic, historical, cultural, experiential relationships to what is extraneous. The interpreter in the hermeneutical sense, therefore, always finds herself/himself in a condition of affinity, not similarity, with the text she/he is called upon to translate, which is also in fact ‘situated in the midst of the foreign’.

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Translation as the Mirror Image of Hermeneutics

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to question if, in the field of translation and hermeneutics, we are now facing new challenges. In fact, after the renewal of studies on Schleiermacher and the different methods of translating, and after A. Berman's research on the role of translation in the *Bildung* and H.-G. Gadamer's and P. Ricoeur's work, the relationship between hermeneutics and translation is getting to know a new development. We will identify this new development by exploring a question that emerges from the above work, the question of the untranslatable. Outlined by Ricoeur, by Jacques Derrida and by Walter Benjamin, this concept of the untranslatable is revealed, in the wake of Luigi Pareyson's hermeneutics, to be positive: rather than expressing the impossibility of translation, it points to the inexhaustible nature of truth.

Keywords Truth. Untranslatable. Hermeneutics. Luigi Pareyson. Mirror Image.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Open Questions. – 3 Hermeneutics, the Untranslatable, and Truth.



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1 Introduction

The title of this article refers to a long history which, beginning in the modern period, unfolds across the 19th and 20th centuries. That history could be traced from Friedrich Schleiermacher and his different methods of translation to Antoine Berman and his studies devoted to the role of translation in *Bildung* – alternately, one could begin with Walter Benjamin and proceed to the studies concerning the relation between translation and culture in the work of Laurence Venuti, as well as to the proximity between translation and hermeneutics that is found in Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. The main ideas of these philosophers are well-known and there is no need to summarise them here.¹

Our task here is to probe these potentialities in light of several questions that characterise translation ‘as such’, as it were, in order to see how hermeneutics responds to them. It is this alone that the title “Translation as the Mirror Image of Hermeneutics” is meant to indicate an investigation into the potentialities of hermeneutics: seeing in what measure and how it innovatively addresses questions concerning translation that remain unresolved, doubtful, and open – questions whose destiny is perhaps to never be completely resolved. The “Mirror Image of Hermeneutics” is thus less an indication of method than it is a question; namely, how does hermeneutics deal with the questions that translation poses? How does it respond to them? The aim here is not to explain the meaning of a relation which already exists between the two, but rather to see what hermeneutics can explain or offer for understanding given that the questions that translation must face have changed.

2 Open Questions

Are there questions that characterise translation as such and which, having still not found an answer, constitute a provocation to hermeneutics? It seems to us that the question of ‘equivalence’ obligates us to answer in the affirmative. When passing from an original text to its translation, is the same thing said or ‘almost’ the same thing?

* Translated from French by Marco Dozzi.

¹ See Cercel 2009. Cf. also Siever 2010. Another monograph that poses the question of translation and interpretation is Lenk 1993. Recently, there has also been a quite interesting renaissance of studies on translation in Italy. We will limit ourselves to citing two monographs that take up the question of the link between translation and interpretation: Nardelli 2021 and Hrníez’s 2022. Finally, I have also elaborated upon the issue that is discussed in this essay in Canullo 2017. This book contains a more articulated exposition of my theses.

This question opens a wide field concerning the choice of translation methods, as Schleiermacher well understood. To the list of different methods of translation, one can now add the indispensable investigations in philosophy of language and in analytic philosophy, for whom the question of equivalence (linguistic as well as textual) is essential.

What is (or what must be) the criterion of equivalence? And how should we pose the question concerning this criterion? In the 18th century, Johann Breitinger said that the best translation would be one that is totally faithful to the original text:² one that would be carried out by substituting each word with an equivalent word in the target language, which was possible due to the (presupposed) existence of a community of human languages and thoughts. Arthur Schopenhauer opposed this thesis, affirming in his *Parerga et Paralipomena* that a language cannot be wholly interchangeable with another, and hence that equivalence was impossible.³ Moving beyond this opposition, Francesca Ervas in Italy has recently proposed another equivalence that she calls “semantic”.⁴ On this view, the translator instead has the difficult task of discerning the intentions of the author and to be a mediator between him or her and the linguistic system of the community that receives the text. Using an approach grounded in analytic philosophy, Ervas analyses the theses of Davidson and Quine and explains the critical remarks that Davidson addresses to the philosopher of “radical translation”.⁵

Despite these efforts, however, the question of equivalence is still haunted by the opposition between the partisans of its necessity and those of its impossibility. Paul Ricoeur has taken up this question by reformulating it in terms of the pair ‘translatable/untranslatable’. If total equivalence between the original and its translation is impossible, this is owed to the fact some things are untranslatable. And yet, given that “in spite of everything, we translate”, another kind of equivalence must be thought: an “equivalence without identity”.⁶ As a corollary to this formulation, the pair ‘translatable/untranslatable’ is replaced by ‘faithful/unfaithful’. Since we are always in a situation of translating languages, texts, and cultures, ensuring that understanding and cohabitation are possible despite such cultural differences requires testing the limits of the faithfulness of a translation to its source. Noting that translation is inscribed within the “long litany of items which are ‘in spite of everything’”⁷ and approaching what

² See Breitinger [1740] 1966.

³ See Schopenhauer [1815] 1891.

⁴ See Ervas 2009.

⁵ For Quine’s “radical translation”, see Quine 1959, 148-72; 1969.

⁶ Ricoeur 2006, 22 [2004, 40].

⁷ Ricoeur 2006, 33.

Antoine Berman called the “desire to translate”,⁸ Ricoeur notes the heuristic role that translation plays in relation to the target language; that is, the translator’s own language. In other words, the goal of the “desire to translate” is “the enlargement of the horizon of one’s own language” as well as education, *Bildung*, and “the discovery [...] of resources in one’s own language that have been left uncultivated”.⁹ Of course, this enlargement that is brought about by the translation does not eliminate the dilemma of ‘faithful/unfaithful’, to which Ricoeur replies that the alternative is nourished by the fact that

[...] there is no absolute criterion for good translation; for such a criterion to be available, we would have to be able to compare the source and target texts with a third text which would bear the identical meaning that is supposed to be passed from the first to the second. [...] Hence the paradox of the following dilemma: a good translation can only aim at a presumed equivalence, one that is not founded in a demonstratable identity of meaning. It is an equivalence without identity.¹⁰

Thus, for Ricoeur, the pair ‘faithful/unfaithful’ replaces the pair ‘translatable/untranslatable’ as an answer to the problem of equivalence. The untranslatable refers to the term or the concept that is lacking in the target language. We propose referring to this idea of the untranslatable as ‘negative’. It is negative not only in terms of the formulation of the term (‘untranslatable’ insofar as ‘not translatable’), but also because it is conceived by contrast and opposition to a hypothetical positive which would be its equivalent – and this applies even to Ricoeur’s ‘equivalence without identity’. From an analytic perspective, Ervas also notes that her ‘semantic equivalence’ has the explicit purpose of defending translation from the snares of the untranslatable.¹¹ Thus, it is by posing the question of equivalence that translation discovers the untranslatable: its ‘stumbling block’. As Marc de Launay has noted, this obliges the translator to re-write the text.¹² Of course, this is a hermeneutical task because, as De Launay writes,

[...] instead of a third text, and in its place, translators have only a hermeneutic at their disposal; that is, the reconstruction of an original that must, in the best of cases, show which aspects of

⁸ See Berman 1984.

⁹ Ricoeur 2006, 21 (translation modified) [2004, 39].

¹⁰ Ricoeur 2006, 22 (translation modified) [2004, 40].

¹¹ Ervas 2009, 25-9.

¹² De Launay 2006, 40-52.

this original are innovations relative to the discourse it was contemporaneous with, whereby the discourse served as a foundation for such innovation. It would thus also show which aspects are re-prises of the discursive and – more generally – cultural tradition which was its context.¹³

That said, the task and power of hermeneutics is the search for an equivalent – even without identity. This is because, despite the difficulties that spring from cultural and linguistic differences, or despite an effective untranslatability, one translates ‘in spite of everything’.

In this context, there is a merging of translation and hermeneutics in Gadamer’s famous proclamation:

The situation of the translator and that of the interpreter are fundamentally the same. In bridging the gulf between languages, the translator clearly exemplifies the reciprocal relationship that exists between interpreter and text, and that corresponds to the reciprocity involved in reaching an understanding in conversation. For every translator is an interpreter [...] The translator’s task of re-creation differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutical task that any text presents.¹⁴

Thus, the ‘power of hermeneutics’ would consist in making translatability possible despite the difficulties posed by the difference between languages.

Is this solution to the question satisfying to such a degree that we recognise that, in the end, it is the only possible reading of the untranslatable? This does not seem to us to be the case, and it suffices to read (even quickly) the theses of Walter Benjamin and of Jacques Derrida to hear different echoes, ones that call for innumerable commentaries and new investigations.¹⁵ Here, it seems to us, we are dealing with what we call the ‘untranslatable’ in a positive sense: an untranslatable that is not in opposition to the ‘in spite of everything’ of translation. To the contrary, we would say – paraphrasing Benjamin – that this is an untranslatable that forms the task of translation.

Regarding Benjamin’s text *The Task of the Translator*, we can say today what Ricoeur said a long time ago about phenomenology: that is, that it was “the sum total of Husserl’s work and the heresies that came from Husserl himself”.¹⁶ Benjamin’s text has indeed had the

¹³ De Launay 2006, 51.

¹⁴ Gadamer 1975, 405.

¹⁵ See Saraniti 2009.

¹⁶ Ricoeur 1986, 9.

same fate, being expanded by numerous and original commentaries, sometimes heretical, of which Benjamin himself has been a source of inspiration. This occurred, we suggest, because it was a study which had an authentic heuristic power capable of bringing to light the creative and revelatory core of translation itself. And by that very power, this text has never ceased to grow, to expand, as Benjamin said of the target language, whose destiny is to change and to discover its truth thanks to the new possibilities opened up by the translation.¹⁷

This growth is constituted by those commentaries which, not being limited to a re-writing of the text, achieve progress in the reflection on translation. Here we will cite two well-known commentaries: Derrida's texts *Des tours de Babel*¹⁸ and *What is a Relevant Translation?*,¹⁹ as well as Antoine Berman's book *The Age of Translation. A Commentary on Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"*.²⁰ It is no coincidence that these commentaries insistently question not only the meaning and messianic character of the untranslatable, but also its capacity to renew and to discover other possibilities in language – just as Benjamin suggested and Berman has also noted:

[...] for Benjamin, translation has no meaning for the original text. We might add that via translation the text has reaffirmed and corroborated its base untranslatability [...] Just as translatability structures the text, just as the desire to be translated is inscribed within the original, like the original's desire to be torn away from itself and its language, untranslatability structures the text too; we might even say that it is its most intimate source of pride [...]. The text finds its deepest core in its untranslatability – it is the very thing that allows us to attribute a 'core' to the text [...] The more translation, in its radicalness, tries to exhaust the untranslatability of a text, the more this untranslatability reveals new layers of untranslatability, *ad infinitum*.²¹

Even Derrida has insisted on untranslatability in his reading of Benjamin. In his commentary, the positive sense of the untranslatable makes its appearance after the study on the untranslatability of the proper noun 'Babel' and, in particular, after the remarks on translation that arise from the original text conceived of as a 'core':

¹⁷ Benjamin 2000, 75-83.

¹⁸ Derrida 1985, 165-207 [1998, 203-35].

¹⁹ Derrida 2000, 365-88 [2005, 174-200].

²⁰ Berman 2018 [2006]. In addition to the texts just cited, one could add Robinson 2022.

²¹ Berman 2018, 79-80 (translation modified) [2006, 68-9].

One recognises a core (the original as such) by the fact that it can bear further translating and retranslating. A translation, *as such*, cannot. Only a core, because it resists the translation it attracts, can offer itself to further translating operations without letting itself be exhausted.²²

It is this core which we propose to call the ‘positive untranslatable’: an irreducible core that can only be discovered on its own basis.

Thus, there are indeed two forms of the untranslatable. But is there a link between the negative and the positive meaning? Do these meanings share something more than a name? The negative sense of ‘untranslatable’ results from the difficulties that we encounter when the translator’s reference point is equivalence, whereas the positive sense emerges as a core that must be incessantly re-translated. However, this legitimate distinction risks becoming artificial if we understand it in an absolute sense. Indeed, the two senses present two different meanings of a single trait: that is, the impossibility of a reproduction of the original by the translation. In that case, however, are we still dealing with hermeneutics and its power?

Of course, the question always comes back to the meaning of comprehension and the interpretation of texts, but the discussion up to this point seems to lay greater emphasis on the strengths of hermeneutics rather than those of translation. We seem to be dealing with the passage from one age to another: from the age of reason which Jean Greisch has called “hermeneutics”²³ to the age of translation. Thus, the question becomes: is there still a task that characterises hermeneutics as such, one that demonstrates its own capacity to answer the questions opened by translation? One could object that, in view of the above, it would be preferable to invert the terms in the title of this article and speak of ‘Hermeneutics as Mirror Image by Translation’. That would nevertheless not permit a heuristic internal to hermeneutics itself – a heuristic that we propose to introduce with the following question: given that the translative act is a ‘hermeneutical matter’, how can it change and transform itself all while responding to questions opened by an act that deploys its powers? In other words: how does answering the questions discussed so far have an impact on hermeneutics? What are the potentialities of hermeneutics that come to light in the very instant in which it responds to the questions that have been discussed so far?

The open question here is the problem of the untranslatable, and it is on that basis that hermeneutics will be questioned once again. But is this attempt legitimate? Is the untranslatable a hermeneutical mat-

²² Derrida 1985, 192 [1998, 225].

²³ Greisch 1985.

ter as much as it is a matter of translatability? For us, this is a hermeneutical question, because what cannot be translated (because there is no equivalent to it or even because it evades translation) calls for an interpretation that responds to the desire to translate. Of course, there are other questions (the spirit/letter debate, the faithful/unfaithful dichotomy) that are hermeneutical matters, but the untranslatable leads to direct proximity with hermeneutics. When it comes to the untranslatable, a series of questions spontaneously arise that are decisive for hermeneutics and which converge around the question of truth. The following are two examples, borrowed from Derrida and Benjamin.

Commenting on Benjamin's affirmation that a translation's target language grows and expands under the influence of translation, Derrida writes:

If the growth of language must also reconstitute without representing [...] can translation lay claim to the truth? Truth – will that still be the name of what determines the laws of translation? Here we touch – at a point no doubt infinitely small – the limit of translation. The pure untranslatable and the pure transferable here pass one into the other – and it is the truth, “itself materially”.²⁴

And later on:

Truth is apparently beyond every *Übertragung* [“transfer”] and every possible *Übersetzung* [“translation”]. It is not the representational correspondence between the original and the translation, nor even the primary adequation between the original and some object or signification exterior to it. Truth would be rather the *pure language* in which the meaning and the letter no longer dissociate.²⁵

Yet how does Benjamin pose the question? What does he have in mind when he speaks of truth?

The translator's task is to find the intention inherent in the language into which the work is to be translated, on the basis of which an echo of the original is awakened in it [...] his work is animated by the great motive of integrating the plurality of languages into a single true language [...] [a language in which] the languages themselves agree, complemented and reconciled with each other in their mode of meaning. If there is indeed a language of truth, in which the ultimate secrets toward which all thinking strives are peacefully and even silently contained, then this language of truth

²⁴ Derrida 1985, 190 [1998, 223].

²⁵ Derrida 1985, 195-6 [1998, 228].

is the true language. In fact, this language is concealed intensive-ly in translations, and the anticipation and description of this language is the only perfection the philosopher can hope to achieve.²⁶

It is important to note what Benjamin says here about pure language; i.e., *reine Sprache*, the language of truth. Combining Kant's sense of *rein* with Hölderlin's,²⁷ Berman writes: "*Rein* also means empty; transitive. Pure language is language that does not circulate content; language that reposes in itself and is not a means toward..."²⁸ And later on: "Pure language is the non-said *par excellence* of natural languages";²⁹ a language that is always to come. Here Berman is interpreting Benjamin's *reine Sprache*. However, no commentary limits itself to being a paraphrase: it expands the text. It is thus by this return to the text – making it expand and grow, as Benjamin said of language – that we propose to connect truth and pure language, thereby bringing these two commentaries (Derrida and Berman) together despite the different motivations which drive them and the different horizons within which they are situated. These commentaries constitute the growth of the original text. What has grown, what has increased, is the question of the untranslatable – a question that simultaneously stimulates the question of truth to mature within itself through a sort of internal dehiscence. For even if pure language is untranslatable, this language is nonetheless the language of truth: a question which comes to light in this in-between that constitutes the gap between pure translatability and pure untranslatability.

Through this growth of the text within its commentaries, at least two traits appear: the question of the untranslatable and the question of truth come into contact in the space that is generated by the fact that the text is translatable in theory (*de jure*), but untranslatable in practice (*de facto*). Yet the truth is also this *reine Sprache* which is "the non-said *par excellence*". Thus, we are dealing with a truth that is an interstice; a gap – a truth which is always to come; a truth that is always an inexhaustible 'task'. It is a truth that nourishes translation all while remaining unsayable; ineffable. It is no coincidence that Berman calls attention to precisely this characteristic of *reine Sprache*. We are faced with the paradox of the untranslatable in the positive sense: this is what makes truth accessible by negation (*per viam negationis*), which is to say that attains a true inef-

²⁶ Benjamin 2000, 80 (translation modified).

²⁷ "'Pure', in Kant, signals everything that is not empirical (*a posteriori*), everything that is a priori in nature [...] But Benjamin's *rein* has an additional source: Hölderlin [...] *Rein*, for Hölderlin, is what connects us to the source" (Berman 2018, 129).

²⁸ Berman 2018, 129.

²⁹ Berman 2018, 129.

fable. Because we are dealing with the positive sense – which is to say, ineffable truth – how is it that it is not translation, but hermeneutics that can answer this question? How is it put to the test? Indeed, both translation and truth are wholly ‘a hermeneutical matter’. Yet does this remain true even when truth becomes a matter of the untranslatable, or even an untranslatable question?

3 Hermeneutics, the Untranslatable, and Truth

Let us return to our question: how do the potentialities of hermeneutics reveal themselves in answering the questions that have been posed? Until now, the question that has been posed is: what truth is involved in the question of the untranslatable? We have offered an answer by deploying truth negatively, treating it as ineffable and as always to come – and we have done so paradoxically, by posing the question from the viewpoint of an untranslatable that is conceived positively. We propose grasping the meaning of this inversion (the positive untranslatable, negative truth) in the absence of a hermeneutics that poses the question of truth positively. The question thus becomes whether we have a non-negative meaning of truth at our disposal, one that conceives it as being neither ineffable nor as nonsense. Yet is this the only alternative? By no means: the question can be reformulated and truth can be conceived in a positive sense by hermeneutics rather than by translation.

Concerning the other approach to the untranslatable which we have called ‘negative’, the question of truth is less relevant than the question of equivalence. Is there something true in the ‘positive’ approach which is fated not only to be evasive (Benjamin, Derrida, Berman), but to offer itself to translation in a manner which, though inexhaustible from the point of view of the untranslatable, is nevertheless sayable? Might it be inexhaustible in its very sayability? Perhaps translation is not only the act of passing from one language to another, but rather the ‘self-translation’ of a content which has to be expressed because – despite the failures and the difficulties that it encounters – it translates itself, using the verb ‘translate’ here in its original sense: namely, ‘to present’ or ‘to present itself’; to carry or to carry ‘in front of’. To make something be, to make something happen before the translation is actually performed, we translate what translates itself; that is, in the sense of the French ‘*se traduire devant à*’ [“to translate in front of...”]. From this viewpoint, the tendency to translate [*Neigung zum Übersetzen*] would no longer be a property of the text or of the translator, but rather a principal movement of translation itself. It is this principal movement that we propose to call ‘the coming’ of the truth in its ‘having to be translated’ in order to be interpreted and understood.

Here we need a figure of truth to confirm this thesis: a truth that translates itself in moving *from* the desire to translate of the translator and of the text *to* the tension of translating itself; that is, toward the ‘having to translate’ as the *Neigung* characterises the truth itself. In this sense, the untranslatable would no longer be what escapes translation, but is rather the core of the very act of ‘self-translation’ as ‘translating itself’. In other words, the untranslatable is not what cannot be translated or what mystically escapes translation: it is the movement by which something is understood because it has to ‘present itself in front of...’.

Have we achieved any progress on the questions posed above? And if so, toward what? We have undoubtedly progressed in our comprehension of the truth, which we propose to understand as the heart that moves ‘self-translation’. We translate because the very movement of truth moves toward ‘self-translation’, to ‘passing’. But to where? Why is this not a transition that is destined to remain an abstract hypothesis and something ‘purely possible’ – an empty game of mirrors set up exclusively to justify the fact that, ‘in spite of everything’, we translate? Where, then? In the ‘self-giving’ to interpret. Interpretation is a concrete form through which truth understands itself without becoming fixed in a single expression. In order to explain this thesis, we must look for a figure of truth that is close to what we have said up to this point and we must deploy its consequences for hermeneutics and for translation.

A figure of truth that is not in contradiction with the figure of the untranslatable is proposed by the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson in his work *Verità e interpretazione (Truth and Interpretation)*. Distinguishing between thought that is exclusively expressive – limiting itself to expressing its own time – and revelatory thought, whose goal is to manifest the truth and is expressive at the same time, Pareyson writes:

In revelatory thought, [...] on the one hand, everyone says the same thing, and on the other hand, everyone says a single thing [...] that is, the truth, which can only be one and the same... and each person says a single thing; that is, they say the truth in their own way, in the way that is theirs alone [...]. There is thus a single, intemporal truth within the various and historical formulations of it that are given. Yet such a singularity [...] can only be an infinity that is stimulated and nourished by all its formulations without allowing itself to be exhausted by any of them or by privileging any of them [...] Only insofar as it is inexhaustible does truth entrust itself to the word that reveals it, conferring a profundity upon it that can never be completely explained nor entirely clarified.³⁰

30 Pareyson 1971-82, 18 (transl. M. Dozzi).

According to Pareyson, there is another characteristic that belongs to truth beyond its inexhaustibility: non-objectifiability. He writes:

If truth can only be grasped as inexhaustible, it will be less an object and a result than an origin and an impulse; thought: rather than speaking about truth as if it were a concluded whole, thought must contain it, move it, and feed upon it – finding within it the impetus of its own trajectory; the source of its own content; the measure of its own efficacy. A presence resides in thought that is all the more active and effective the less it is configurable and definable. [...] Its non-objectifiability is original and profound: it manifests an arresting ulteriority whose truth is obtained in diverse perspectives only insofar as it does not identify itself with any of them, and it makes discourse possible only insofar as it does not resolve itself in discourse.³¹

A mode of thinking that is adapted to this venue of truth must be a mode of thinking that is hermeneutical and interpretative; one that does not reduce this alethic originality to objectivising formulas in which interpretation is both expressive and revelatory. Far from being subjective, Pareyson writes,

[...] the fundamental principle of hermeneutics is that the only knowledge adequate to truth is interpretation, which means that truth is accessible and attainable in many ways – and none of these ways, if it is to be worthy of being called ‘interpretation’, is privileged over the others in the sense of claiming to possess the truth in an exclusive way.³²

Because truth is simultaneously both expressive and revelatory, even interpretation unites the revelatory moment and the moment that is expressive and historical within itself:

[...] truth is singular, but its formulation is multiple. And there is no contradiction between the singularity of truth and its formulations because, by virtue of interpretation – which is always both historical and revelatory – the singularity of truth is manifested only within the historical and singular formulations of it that are given. It is precisely interpretation that maintains truth as singular in the very act that incessantly multiplies its formulations. Interpretation is not, cannot be, and need not be singular: by definition, it is multiple. Yet its multiplicity consists of the ever new

³¹ Pareyson 1971-82, 26 (transl. M. Dozzi).

³² Pareyson 1971-82, 57 (transl. M. Dozzi).

and diverse formulations of truth; that is, the multiplicity that, far from compromising and dispersing the singularity of truth, instead maintains it and at the same time feeds on it: it safeguards it while also drawing solicitation and inspiration from it.³³

In order to respond to the objection of relativism, Pareyson gives the example of musical interpretation: here interpretation reveals the work, making it accessible without claiming to be the only possible interpretation.

This presentation of Pareyson's text does not convey its full richness. Nevertheless, the figure of truth that he proposes is in conformity with what we are looking for: an unobjectifiable, inexhaustible truth; one that is always postponed, lending itself to interpretation without being exhausted by it. Thus, interpretation is the effective mode by which truth lends itself to understanding without allowing itself to be reduced to singular expressions. Interpretation is our way of accessing truth, precisely insofar as it is interpretation of truth.³⁴

Pareyson does not speak of translation in the terms that we have employed; that is, as 'placing oneself in front of...' or 'the self-translation of truth', even if the way in which he speaks about truth opens interpretation up to this feature: that is, translation as truth's own way of presenting itself to us and to our understanding, as well as hermeneutics as the effective act of truth's 'self-translation'. The potentialities of hermeneutics remain within this movement, which it is original; they are inscribed within this untranslatable and unobjectifiable. This untranslatable lies below the distinction between negative and positive discussed above: in translating itself, it 'has to come' by translating itself, by giving itself to interpretation in an interpretative act that is adequate to its inexhaustible being.

How then is translation configured to the challenge of this hermeneutic that interprets an untranslatable truth in its movement which 'brings it to translate itself'? This untranslatable is not untranslatable because of a lack of equivalence (even without identity) or because it is pure language, but because it is the very movement that brings itself to translation. It has to translate itself and to pass from one language to another in order to be understood and so as to not be an empty movement, being instead a movement that can always renew itself and regenerate itself. This cannot be an expressive translation (Benjamin would say a 'communicative' one), but a revelatory translation: that is, one that reveals the fact that 'passing from one language to another' – from one text to another, from one culture to another – is a gesture in which there is a translation of a truth of

³³ Pareyson 1971-82, 67 (transl. M. Dozzi).

³⁴ Cf. Pareyson 1971-82, 53.

texts and of cultures whose hermeneutical dimension of openness is not accidental. The untranslatable of the translation is the inexhaustible and unobjectifiable movement of the truth that presents itself.

This is a truth which is the 'how' of the communication of the meaning that lives in the respective texts and cultures. The untranslatable lies below its negative or positive formulation: it is the alethic core which 'has to be translated'; that is, to pass from one language to another, to arrive by interpretations in which the meaning that is to be understood is given. It is the 'to come' of the translation because it is first and foremost what comes; what is given in being translated. And 'what comes' in the translation is a feature of the truth – its advance; its presentation in the interpretation that grasps it. Its original *trans-ducere* (the Latin for 'translation', which is composed of *trans* – across, beyond, through – and *ducere*; to lead or to command); its *trans-porting* is given by this untranslatable core not because it is ineffable, but is untranslatable insofar as it is what never stops 'translating itself'; it is the inexhaustible drive of this inclination to translate itself. This truth is given to understanding by first going 'to the front' in order to meet other languages and cultures in the efficacy of the translation. It is a movement from one beginning to another; a series of beginnings that will never end.

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Heidegger and the Problem of Translating the Greek Beginning

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Abstract This article addresses the problem of translation in Heidegger based on the concept of beginning. Depending on how the beginning is thought of, the meaning of translation changes decisively. Thus, starting with a clarification of the concept of beginning within 'being-historical thinking', which is often absent from the debate on translation in Heidegger, the groundlessness of a Greek beginning understood as a pure, extra-historical and unspeakable origin, which would therefore determine translation as an inevitable failure, is shown. From the 'spatio-temporal structure of the beginning' opened up by translation – thus from Heidegger's premises – a downgrading of the priority of the Greeks is also suggested, regaining the possibility of a 'Latin beginning'.

Keywords Heidegger. Translation. Anfang. Time-Space. Beiträge.

Summary 1 Reframing the Problem of Translation in Heidegger's Thinking. – 2 The Greek Beginning: Dawn or Dusk?. – 3 The 'Purity' of the Beginning: An Extralinguistic Question?. – 4 Questioning the Greek Primacy: The Time-space of Translation. – 5 Conclusions.



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1 Reframing the Problem of Translation in Heidegger's Thinking

The translation is perhaps one of the most heated topics in contemporary Heidegger research. Therefore, given the liveliness of the debate still ongoing, the intention here is not to take stock of translation studies in Heidegger, but rather to deepen a point that has perhaps remained in the shadows in this debate, however important it is: the meaning of the Greek beginning in Heidegger's thinking. The inescapable connection between translation and beginning will be shown, and on this basis, the thesis of the inevitable failure of translation for Heidegger – recently made a comeback – will be both scaled-down and a new way of looking at Heidegger's translation will be proposed, one that can also translate Heidegger himself and open him up to other perspectives.

From the occurrences of the theme of translation in Heidegger's works,¹ we know that the topic is dealt with primarily about the (im)possibility of translating Greek thought, and then concerns the meaning and possibility of translation in general. It seems that it is Heidegger's harsh judgement of Latin translations of Greek that points to the impossibility of translation (cf. Chiareghin 1993, 102-3). One need only think of the controversial rendition of *energeia* with *actus*, just to cite the most emblematic and even 'epochal' example. The Latin translation of *energeia* marked a profound discontinuity in the history of thought, as Heidegger emphatically states: "with one blow the Greek world was toppled [*verschüttet*]" (Heidegger 1976, 286; Eng. transl. 218). According to Heidegger, *actus* is the word of a thought, the Roman one, rooted in an experience fundamentally different from the Greek one. *Energheia*, "standing-in-the-work in the sense of presencing into the appearance", refers to the unveiling movement that, according to Heidegger, characterises *physis* and *aletheia* too, whereas *actus* severed the link with this dimension, referring rather to action and effects.²

The profound rupture between the Greek and Roman worlds thus depicts a panorama in which cultures are separated by abysmally different fundamental experiences, of which there is apparently no translation. Heidegger himself declares that "all translations are poor, only more or less so" (Heidegger 1979, 45; Eng. transl. 38) and "one can no more translate thought than one can translate a poem. At

¹ Heidegger's best-known passages on translation are collected and commented on by Giometti 1995 and Nardelli 2021.

² For the importance of the notion of *energheia* in Heidegger's thought and its specificity within the Greek experience of being, see Volpi 1990. Note that the translation of *energheia* here cited is by Heidegger.

best, one can paraphrase it" (Heidegger 2000a, 680; Eng. transl. 63). Already here it is possible to detect the beginning/translation nexus. Greek is in fact beginning both in the sense of a source text from which one translates and in the sense of the beginning of a story within which those who come after are situated in the wake of those who come before. If this beginning is then thought of as irreducible, its translation/transmission can only be imperfect, if not impossible. But is this how Heidegger thinks of the beginning – and thus, its translation?

It must be acknowledged that Heidegger himself engages in more than one translation from Greek, and this is not at all for a merely auxiliary purpose. Consider, for instance, the role played by his translations of Aristotle against Aristotelian Thomism (cf. Nardelli 2021, 46). What then distinguishes Heidegger's translations from the Latin ones? Is it perhaps a more faithful adherence to the Greek text? Forcing the issue a bit, one could say that, if this were the case, Heidegger's translations would be 'truer' than the Latin ones insofar as they are more in keeping with their subject matter. They would thus be 'adequate' translations.

However, those familiar with Heidegger would rule out this option from the outset, given Heidegger's long-standing polemic both with the (Latin!) concept of truth in the sense of *adaequatio* and, more generally, with the idea of a "historiographical" (*historisch*) reconstruction as a guarantor of the truth of philosophical discourse.³ How, moreover, outside of metaphor, are we to understand the 'encrustations' that Heidegger's translations remove from the Aristotelian text? Are they perhaps the waste products of a nefarious process, i.e. translation?

In addition to this problem, there is a second, more complex one. Indeed, Heidegger repeatedly emphasises the initial role of the Greeks: with them not only does the history of philosophy begin, but that of the entire West. From this point of view, translation not only traces an insurmountable furrow between the Greek beginning and the Roman world but can go so far as to connote Western history itself as an overall translation of its Greek root. If, moreover, translations are claimed to be impossible and betray the original Greek experience, then the whole history risks being considered "the history of an error" (Heidegger 2009, 139; Eng. transl. 119). But is this the meaning of Heidegger's "oblivion of being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*)?

³ According to Heidegger, reasoning in historiographic terms, e.g. according to the law of cause and effect, is legitimate and correct; the point is that philosophy should not remain confined to the dimension of correctness, because this is not an original dimension. For there to be correctness, there must in fact first be something to which one can measure oneself, and it is precisely to this dimension that Heidegger looks.

Does Heidegger implicitly believe that time, and history, are the site of a progressive corruption of an otherwise perfect beginning – the Greek one? If so, it might then be a good thing for the Greek world to be sheltered from a threatening translation.

What is proposed here is to address these questions precisely from this particular link between translation and the Heideggerian concept of beginning. This approach will make it possible not only to avoid certain inaccuracies, such as the idea of a Greek beginning subsequently corrupted by translation but also to appreciate the specificity of the Heideggerian concept of translation, which, far from being considered simply impossible, is valorised precisely in its initiating capacity. In anticipation, it can be said that Heidegger negatively evaluates only a certain type of translation, namely those that claim to achieve perfect identity with the source text by simply changing the linguistic guise of meanings that are supposed to be in themselves valid and unchangeable. Rather than identity, Heidegger's translation is that which allows for the experience of difference, and it is precisely in the Heideggerian concept of the beginning that the different elements are held together, thus becoming experienceable as such. As will be seen, translation is beginning, both in the sense that translation is the translation of the beginning and in the sense that the beginning is such in translation.

Hitherto, the concept of the beginning has played a marginal role in the debate on translation in Heidegger. By focussing on the Greek character of the expression "Greek beginning", perhaps by emphasising its irreducibility, the properly initiating trait has receded into the background. In this sense, the beginning ends up becoming a mere 'first', the source text of a translation that cannot but accentuate its isolation – an impossible translation. Nevertheless, Heidegger's beginning is far more complex than being a mere first. Moreover, understanding the status that the Greek beginning has in Heidegger's thought is indispensable for deducing the meaning of the translation itself. If it were, for example, a beginning that is radically separated from the course of history, the hypothesis of translation as that which contributes to this caesura would then be supported. If, on the other hand – and this is the case – the beginning emphasises the full historicity of the origin, then one must be particularly cautious in interpreting those passages of Heidegger in which he may seem to seek a dimension beyond translation, somehow pure. Above all, if there is an essential link between the beginning and the translation, then the translation can only be seen as that which brings the origin closer rather than distancing it. It will therefore be a matter of clarifying the meaning of Heidegger's beginning and consequently reading the meaning assumed by the translation of the Greek experience of being. This will make it possible also to shed new light on what is understood as a source text.

One possible reason to explain the lack of attention to the translation/beginning nexus can be found in the fact that while Heidegger mainly discusses translation in his university courses, the concept of beginning belongs to what Heidegger calls “Being-historical thinking” (*seynsgeschichtliches Denken*). As is well known, this thinking has been reserved by Heidegger in the third section of the collection of his works, which include the “unpublished treatises” (*unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen*) on the *Ereignis*. These texts do not explicitly deal with translation, and thus have so far played an ancillary role in the debate on translation in Heidegger. Although there is no common agreement among Heidegger scholars in considering the texts on the history of being as fundamental texts,⁴ in the light of which all others should be read, the very issue of translation can serve as a paradigmatic example of their indispensability.

The question of the translation of the Greek beginning is in fact a case where an issue (translation) is mentioned by Heidegger in a public context (e.g. lectures: cf. Heidegger 1984, 74-6; Eng. transl. 61-3) and always in passing (however dense and valuable these occurrences are), only to be thought again in a different, more collected, and experimental context. The Greeks, the beginning, history, language, identity, difference: these are central themes in the great texts of being-historical thinking, and only by confronting them can we have an appropriate understanding of what the translation of Greek thought means for Heidegger. Furthermore, in these texts the question of translation takes on a deeper nuance than in Heidegger’s lectures, insofar as the question of translation also becomes the one used by Heidegger within his own language, German. In fact, Heidegger does not simply invent new words, nor does he just resort to obsolete ones: his is a real work of translation, where words such as ‘being’, ‘God’, and ‘time’ are kept recognisable and at the same time become foreign words. This type of work on one’s own language, which has been called “intralingual translation” (cf. Schalow 2011), is further evidence of how, in the texts of being-historical thinking, the question of translation is not just a topic, but constantly and capillary part of the experience of thought attempted there. The methodological choice of approaching the problem of translation from the perspective of the beginning, and thus from the texts on the history of being, thus allows access to a deeper level of the question, which cannot be investigated further here but which is a harbinger of many lines of research.⁵

⁴ The debate is recalled for example by Gregorio 2021, 155 and Kovacs 2011, 193. An excellent overview of the update debate, including publications after *Contributions*, is offered by Ardivino, Cesarone 2020.

⁵ Consider, for example, the important section on the lexicon of *Ereignis*, which is particularly interesting considering Heidegger’s aversion to dictionaries (Heidegger 2009, 147-78; Eng. transl. 127-50).

Based on these premises, the second section of this text will briefly clarify what Heidegger means by beginning. Although this is known, it is worth reiterating that for Heidegger the beginning is not a condition of perfection before a decay, as is often understood, even recently. Excluding this conception is crucial to framing the true meaning of Heidegger's translation, because if there is no posthumous corruption of the beginning, one cannot understand translation as one of the main causes of the supposed deterioration of Greek thought.

In the third section, the meaning of Heidegger's beginning will be further explored by discussing two other hypotheses that could undermine the possibility of interpretation. By demonstrating that the beginning Heidegger is talking about is neither extra-historical nor extra-linguistic, the conception of a translation that is impossible because it is addressed to an unattainable dimension will consequently also be rejected. What is impossible is only that translation which claims to coincide with the source text. Therefore, it will be proven that the fruitfulness of the hypothesis of reading translation about the concept of the beginning also and above all consists in being able to place Heidegger's negative statements on translation within the right framework.

In the fourth and final section, an original hypothesis will be attempted. Indeed, the analysis of Heidegger's translation of certain words of the Greek beginning – *physis*, *ousia*, *eon* – brought to light a structure related to how the beginning unfolds and happens. This structure, called "space-time" by Heidegger, can also be applied to Latin terms, such as *veritas* and *ratio*. In this way, it will be proven that the beginning is not necessarily exclusively Greek. Precisely because the beginning is translation and translation is beginning, the beginning is also always in translation, and therefore it is not the specificity of a culture – Greekness – that is essential to it, but rather the space-time structure in which the translation moves. To recognise this is to translate Heidegger's thinking.

2 The Greek Beginning: Dawn or Dusk?

In *Contributions to Philosophy*, the text inaugurating being-historical thinking, the Greek beginning is called "first beginning". The first beginning does not coincide with the history of metaphysics at all, which, in *Contributions* – not without approximations – goes from Plato to Nietzsche (cf. Heidegger 1989, 127; Eng. transl. 89). And yet, the first beginning sums up the fundamental motif of metaphysics, which Heidegger declines in various ways: 1) the experience of being as *physis* (195; 136); 2) the question of "the truth of beings" (die *Wahrheit des Seienden*) (179; 125); 3) the consequent interpretation

of the “being of beings” (*Sein des Seienden*) as “constant presence” (*beständige Anwesenheit*) (191-3; 134-5) based on thought, taken as a leitmotif for the “guiding question” (198; 138-9).

Together these elements constitute that Greek experience of being that would have remained inaccessible to Latin translations. However, it is precisely these fundamental traits that radiate from the beginning to the entire metaphysics, which can thus be summarized in formulas such as “*Übersteigung des Seienden zur Seiendheit* /surpassing of beings to being-ness” (172; 121). It goes without saying that the Greek beginning does not seem so abysmally separated from metaphysics, and thus from the Latin world as well. Indeed, it is already clear from here how the concept of the beginning is decisive in setting the question of translation: if the beginning contains metaphysics in itself (but we shall see that this is not quite the case), either *Romanitas* is outside metaphysics or their translations are not a betrayal of Greekness, but rather an explication of it.

Perhaps then the boundary between beginning and metaphysics falls within Greekness itself, whereby thinkers such as Parmenides and Heraclitus are characterised by a fundamentally different experience of being from that of Plato and Aristotle. If this is the case, then the translation of the beginning would take place in two stages: an intralingual translation, played out entirely within the Greek language (e.g. from Parmenides to Plato), and an interlingual one, between Greek and Latin.

Indeed, Heidegger seems to lean in this direction from the 1940s onwards, but in some passages from *Contributions* Heidegger even traces the first beginning back to Anaximander, leaving no margin for a Greekness all within the history of metaphysics (232, 424; 164, 299). In this respect, *Contributions* is a rather radical text. In other passages from *Contribution*, *physis* itself is indeed claimed to be *techne* in its essential unfolding (190-1; 133-4) and *aletheia* as well is not presented as something original. *Aletheia* is but “erste Aufleuchten/ the first shining forth” (344; 241), therefore it cannot be confused with Heidegger’s *Lichtung*. In the first beginning, Being (*Seyn*) is thought “als Anwesenheit aus der Anwesenung, die das erste Aufleuchten einer Wesung des Seyns darstellt/as presence from within a presencing which manifests the first flashing of *the one* essential swaying be-ing” (31; 22), whereas *Lichtung* refers directly to *Wesung*, of which it could be said that *Anwesenung* is only a part, a declination. And since *Wesung* is the “*Verweigerung/refusal*” of being (244; 172), Heidegger speaks of “*Lichtung für das Sichverbergen/clearing for self-concealing*”. Here there is nothing to do with the *Entbergung* expressed e.g. in the allegory of the cave and by *aletheia* (cf. Heidegger 1988, 145; Eng. transl. 103), because it is not a question of removing the latent aspect within the experience of truth, but rather of thinking unveiling and concealment together (cf. Zarader 1986, 67).

The question of *aletheia* touches on the fundamental point. If Heidegger decides to translate it with *Unverborgenheit*, ‘unconcealness’, it is not to restore an initial meaning that was lost with the Latin translation into *veritas*. Indeed, if the issue were to somehow return to the *aletheia*, it would be incomprehensible why Heidegger in the *Beiträge* contrasts *aletheia* with the *Lichtung*. The translation of *aletheia* with *Unverborgenheit* serves primarily to distance oneself from the Greeks, rather than to return to them (cf. Zarader 1986, 259). Or, said differently, it may even serve to return to them, where, however, the sense of this return is the one indicated by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*: not recomposing a broken identity, but a “replication” (*Erwiderung*) of possibilities already undertaken (cf. Giometti 1995, 71). Just as *Dasein* opens its “tradition” (*Überlieferung*) to the “quiet force of the possible” (Heidegger 1977a, 521; Eng. transl. 446), translation does not simply restore a meaning, as can be the meaning of *aletheia*, lost with *veritas* and found again with *Unverborgenheit*, but opens up the space of a divergence. In this space, for there to be an actual divergence, the elements of divergence, i.e. *aletheia* and *Unverborgenheit*, are somehow related because one refers to (translates) the other. Yet, this relationship does not resolve itself into a static identity, in which the sense of the Greek word is maintained and perfectly converted into the German one. For if *Unverborgenheit* is to be understood as a replication of *aletheia*, then their relationship becomes the place where it is possible to experience otherness, an alternative. What is this space of divergence that opens up in translation and what does this alternative consist of?

Consider the translation of *ousia*, another keyword of the Greek beginning, with *Anwesenheit*:⁶ by this, Heidegger certainly does not intend to restore the sense of being according to *Anwesenheit*, since it is precisely from the conception of being as presence that Heidegger criticises metaphysics. Nor, still, less, is Heidegger accusing the whole history of metaphysics of failing to think of being in temporal terms: on the contrary, *Contributions* shows that presence – a temporal category – has been fundamental in the interpretation of beingness. By making the tradition say that the meaning of being resides in presence, however, Heidegger then intends to raise the

⁶ Curiously, Heidegger justifies the translation of *ousia* with *Anwesenheit* on the basis that *ousia* meant, before Aristotle’s technical usage, ‘good’ in the sense in which it is said of a property (in English, the connection sounds rather between ‘reality’ and ‘real estate’). In this sense, *Anwesen* indicates in German the estate (“Bauern- und Hofgut”, Heidegger 1983a, 65; Eng. transl. 64). Beyond the specific issue, it is interesting to note how a translation that could be described as ‘philosophical’ is justified by resorting to the common use of a language: this is unusual for Heidegger who, except dialect, is wary of the everyday dimension of language. Furthermore, the *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* traces the etymology of *Anwesen* back to the German translation of the Latin *adesse*, in the ninth century.

question: why only presence? Similarly, in *aletheia*, why only unconcealment? The sense of replying to the Greek words, made possible by Heidegger's translations, then becomes that of thinking more deeply about those words, that is, of discerning a somewhat broader dimension within which those words are rooted. Specifically, this broader dimension concerns, as far as *aletheia* is concerned, the aforementioned concealment, while as far as *ousia* is concerned, it is a matter of considering the entire horizon of temporality and not just presence.

Without delving further into Heidegger's interpretation of truth and presence, here it is important to focus on the movement of translation and the nature of the space of divergence it opens up. It is about the space of the beginning itself. If the translation of *aletheia* with *Unverborgenheit* conveys with it the possible question of *Verborgenheit*, as its fundamental replication, and if it, therefore, opens up a dimension that is at once broader than the initially Greek one, since it shifts the focus beyond mere unveiling, then the sphere opened up by the translation is an original, initial sphere. Indeed, not only does the unveiling turn out to be something partial concerning the broader chiaro-scuro dynamic of *Lichtung*, but it is Heidegger himself who sees in veiling the original moment of unveiling.

On closer inspection, the replication made possible by the translation contains a complex movement. *Aletheia* is rendered with *Unverborgenheit*, and from their divergence comes *Lichtung* as the origin of both, namely as that which concerns both veiling and unveiling. Therefore, the original dimension is not found at first, as if it coincided with the *aletheia*, but rather at the end, and, precisely, at the end of the process that inevitably passes through translation. It now becomes understandable in what sense Heidegger thinks of the subtle difference between metaphysics and its beginning: the first beginning lies at the end of metaphysics, both because it is only in its final configuration that metaphysics allows itself to be seen in its essence, and because from this perspective its limits are highlighted, allowing a beginning beyond the end of metaphysics.

If then, the beginning lies at the end of metaphysics, there is no Greek beginning that must be restored and preserved from the threat of what happens next. Therefore, translation cannot even be a movement of corruption of Greek words, nor can it be its mere antidote, in the sense of something that removes an iniquity.⁷ From this point of

⁷ In his important volume, Raspitos 2013 clearly rules out the fact that translation for Heidegger has nothing to do with the equivalence of meaning (17). Therefore, the Latin translations of Aristotle cannot be considered deficient because they have nothing to do with Greek experience (23). However, this does not lead him to reconsider the meaning of translation assumed in Heidegger's thought, but rather to exclude the question of translation (25), precisely because it is not a question of translation if there has

view, the caesura does not seem to fall so much between Greekness and Latinity, but rather between the first beginning and what Heidegger calls the other beginning, i.e. the replication granted by the translations of the words of metaphysics (cf. Cattaneo 2017, 33). Although Heidegger does not mention translation referring to the relationship between the two beginnings, we have seen how it plays a fundamental role in opening up a more original dimension of thought. Here, translation has thus not ceased to have the same purpose as when the young Heidegger was translating Aristotle, namely, to enable a deeper and more critical relationship with what is being translated. However, within the framework of being-historical thinking, this original dimension now embraces the whole of Greekness and is defined as the beginning of Western history.

The alternative that translation opens up is thus not a mere variation on the theme, because, as Heidegger says, the other beginning restores its truth to the first (cf. Heidegger 1989, 187; Eng. transl. 131; Chiereghin 1993, 95). But what does this mean? Why, in other words, does *Unverborgenheit* not simply replace *aletheia*, but translate it, i.e. establishes an *Auseinandersetzung* with it, like a reply? Why are *aletheia*, *Unverborgenheit*, and *Lichtung* not simply different words, but divergent words? Is there an analogy between them? This would mean that there is then a further, fundamental meaning. Is it perhaps *Wahrheit*? A first solution might be to simply understand the truth that the other beginning returns to the first in the sense of *Lichtung*: as we have seen, *Lichtung* is in fact more original than *Unverborgenheit*. But to understand why these words are held together, despite being apart and discordant, one must further insist on the sense assumed by the translation: it is in fact this alone that holds them together, thus excluding any kind of analogy.

What kind of movement is there then between *aletheia* and *Lichtung*? If it is not a question of recomposing an identity of meaning, it is not even a question of a simple displacement. Heidegger's *Übersetzung* is not a simple 'translation' (*Übertragung*) into the other beginning, because the passage to the first beginning (*aletheia* → *Unverborgenheit*) prepares for 'a leap', highlighting the traits of metaphysics from which one must jump, to reach the other beginning (*Unverborgenheit* → *Lichtung*). Heidegger seems to argue this passage by looking at the word *Ursprung*, origin, which contains *Sprung*, leap. The

been a progressive emptying of meaning of Greek experience (39). Here, on the other hand, it is not simply a matter of excluding translation in the sense of equivalence, but rather of identifying a new sense of translation and including it in the dynamic of the beginning, which cannot therefore be considered an alienating process. As will be discussed in the fourth section, the point is not Latins' adequate translation of the Greeks, but whether the Latins were talking about the same thing as the Greeks, namely not *physis*, but the beginning and its spatio-temporal structure.

origin/beginning, reached at the culmination of metaphysics through translation, is then what one jumps from, not something to which one returns. It is also for this reason that Heidegger continues to speak of being, rather than abandoning the word 'being' (cf. Fink, Heidegger 1986, 20; Eng. transl. 8) or proposing a new translation of it, as he did for *logos*, *physis*, and *noein* (cf. Gregorio 2021, 135): being is the word that best circumscribes the history from which one must jump (cf. Heidegger 1985a, 103-4; Eng. transl. 19-20).

One can take this consideration by Heidegger on the meaning of origin and articulate it further. The German word *Anfang* already expresses the overall problem of translation in Heidegger because it does not simply mean the beginning of something, in the sense of the first term of a series, nor the act of initiating (cf. Heidegger 1989, 179, 198; Eng. transl. 126, 138; Heidegger 2009, 147; Eng. transl. 127). *Anfang* contains the verb *fangen*, meaning to capture, to trap; the descent of *Anfang* from *fangen* dates back to the ninth century, when the verb *anfangen*, in Old High German *anafāhan*, arose from *fāhan*, the ancient form of *fangen*, attested a century earlier. If the experience of beginning thus refers somehow to that of 'taking', how can we not think of the Latin *principium*, whose *coepere* refers to *cāpere*?⁸ In this vein, 'inception' seems to be a more faithful translation for *Anfang* than 'beginning'. However, in the grasp, there is also the sense of the trap. Is there then a danger, in the beginning, thought of as inception, or is it rather the general idea of the beginning to be dangerous? After all, the idea of a beginning is far more Latin-Christian than Greek.⁹ Perhaps the beginning is a trap, as Latin? Is the Greek beginning already captured by Latin?

This ambiguity is constitutive of the beginning; after all, the function of the first beginning is precisely to indicate the trap of metaphysical thinking. It is definitely not desirable to return to the origin: the origin "consumes" (Heidegger 1984, 156-70; Eng. transl. 125-40; Heidegger 2000b, 146). Therefore, it is out of place to speak of Heidegger's nostalgia for the origin, in which one could have a pure and immediate experience of things (cf. Nardelli 2021, 228).¹⁰ If one returns to it, it is therefore only to skip it. Heidegger expresses this intuition in different ways, which can be summarized in the motto "Herkunft aber bleibt stets Zukunft" (Heidegger 1985a, 91; Eng.

⁸ While in some Latin languages the connection between taking and beginning can be felt in expressions such as the Italian 'prendere inizio', in English a counterpart can be found in 'taking off'.

⁹ Magris 2020, 306 indeed shows how only in Christ is the beginning also *principium*.

¹⁰ Paltrinieri 2020, 371 effectively emphasises how Heidegger is by no means a thinker animated by a nostalgia for the impossible, referring to the specific meaning that repetition takes on in his thought, namely the opening up of possibilities rather than the restoration of the same.

transl. 10), taking up in a being-historical key what he had already noted in *Being and Time*, namely that the past is opened up by the future (cf. Heidegger 1977a, 431; Eng. transl. 373).

To understand why the Greek beginning consummates, one must look at the translation of another word from the first beginning, i.e. *physis*. Heidegger translates it with *Aufgang*, “unfolding” (cf. Heidegger 1989, 171; Eng. transl. 120), which, just like *Unverborgenheit* and *Anwesenheit*, allows us to perceive a wider dimension: that of closure, of the ‘fold’. Where something opens, something else closes. For instance, the sprouting plant rests on the closure of the earth, which surrounds and guards its roots (cf. Heidegger 1976, 254; Eng. transl. 195). Metaphors aside, Heidegger understands *physis* as the manifestation of things, their opening to the light of *aletheia* and thus shining in their presence. However, by translating *physis* with *Aufgang* it becomes legitimate to question the origin of this unfolding movement. Moreover, this translation makes available the root *-Gang*, from which Heidegger thinks of the whole movement of the beginning, as it is disclosed by the translation. *Physis* is indeed the beginning itself, i.e. the beginning of metaphysics, while *Aufgang* is its reply from the first beginning: they both are held together by translation. The dual structure of the beginning, a sign of the aforementioned ambiguity of the beginning, also contains the movement of the leap into the other beginning: besides *Aufgang* there is *Untergang*, literally ‘going under’ (cf. Heidegger 2009, 148; Eng. transl. 128). The unfolding movement of things refers at the same time to the dimension from which the unfolding/opening takes place. This dimension ‘lies beneath’ in the sense that it is covered by the pre-eminence assumed by the stable presence in the history of metaphysics. With the arising of *physis*, in fact, that experience of being which will culminate in the fulfilment of metaphysics begins, and at the same time the possibility of another beginning “sets” (*geht unter*).

This might give the impression that there is a ‘decline of the West’, in the sense of a move away from the Greeks. Yet, the dimension in which withdrawal occurs is not in itself negative (cf. Heidegger 1985a, 38-9; Eng. transl. 164). Translation in fact allows the question about *Untergang* to be asked, which is therefore not (and should not be) removed from the history of metaphysics, but is preserved in it, awaiting replication. Exactly as with *aletheia*, it is a matter of turning our gaze to the dimension of *Verborgenheit*, which contains a *Bergung*, i.e. a custodianship, and not a mere deprivation. The origin only consumes if there is no sunset in it, that is, only if this custody is lacking.

Heidegger’s Greek beginning is thus neither dusk nor dawn: it is the inseparable union of both (cf. Heraclitus, fragment B57; Fink, Heidegger 1986, 76; Eng. transl. 44). Since the moment of sunset can be seen only at the end of the day, the Greek beginning is only such at the end of metaphysics. This also picks up another motif from *Being*

and Time, namely the opening that occurs at the moment of closure and death. The “disappearing” in the Greeks’ word invoked by Heidegger (Heidegger 1976, 245; Eng. transl. 188) is not a matter of embracing a conclusion, a perfect word that finally exhausts, or would like to exhaust, an unsaturated and needy openness, but of opening up the most proper possibility, i.e. finiteness.

The friction between *Aufgang* and *Untergang* is part of a broader Heidegger’s discourse inherent in the *Scheidung* proper to Being (*Seyn*). This cleavage indeed addresses the “separation” (*Unterscheidung*) of being and beings, which allows Being to be thought of as such, that is, not to be confused with beings. Moreover, this *Unterscheidung* also involves the “parting” (*Abschied*) from this distinction. Indeed, it has already been mentioned how in *Contributions* Heidegger thinks of metaphysics as the transition from beings to their beingness. Metaphysics, therefore, extends within the space of this separation, so that the passage to the other beginning is at the same time the leave-taking from it. In this sense, when Heidegger thinks of the sunset, he does not only mean the moment of custody, but also the moment of departure from the *Aufgang*. Metaphysics unfolds until it reaches its end/beginning, after which it folds back. The beginning is thus dismissing: that is why Heidegger seeks it because it is capable of distancing, that is, of opening up a distance. That which sets are “the ones to come” (*die Zukünftigen*), that is, those who sacrifice themselves to make room for what is to come, i.e. no longer the coming to the fore of *physis*, but “the last God” (cf. Heidegger 1989, 397; Eng. transl. 278). “Dieser Untergang ist erstester Anfang / This going-under is the very first of the first beginning” (397; 278).

The sunset is then both the inauguration of the space of metaphysics, with the prevailing of the unfolding over the hidden dimension, and at the same time a departure from it, in view of another rising. Therefore, it is worth noting that Heidegger’s Being does not lie under the ruins of an unfortunate tradition, which must simply be removed. Being’s lying underneath is an integral part of its beginning: it must be understood in the sense of its sowing, rather than its burial. The Greek dawn is thus a beginning in the specific sense of Heidegger’s thought not because it comes before the darkness of night (Latinity?) nor a moment of the freshness of thought before the encumbrance of tradition. Not even – and this is the decisive aspect – because it contains the faint light of an even more remote origin, which would be located in some kind of inaccessible dimension – something not very phenomenological. Heidegger recalls in this regard the *Dämmerung* is also present in the morning, namely that moment when the sun has not yet risen, and which is therefore indistinguishable from sunset (cf. Heidegger 1985a, 38, 246; Eng. transl. 164, 127). It should therefore be noted that the dawning aspect of the Greek beginning, its ‘solar’ moment, is that which insists on the moment of the *Aufgang*, of the unfolding, which is

the unfolding of the entity, its coming into presence. Therefore, to insist on this is to preclude what is instead the truly inaugural aspect for Heidegger, namely the moment of sunset. In the particular language of *Contributions*, Heidegger indeed claims that the other beginning “does not somehow just enter the light of the day”, and yet, while the first beginning conceals “seiner Verschlossenheit im unerbrochenen Ursprung / its enclosedness in the unerupted origin”, the other beginning “bleibt in der eigenen Tiefe verborgen / remains sheltered in its own depth”, “in der Klarheit eines schweren Dunkles der sich Selbst wissenden, in der Besinnung erstandenen Tiefe / in the clarity of a severe darkness of a depth that knows itself and has arisen into mindfulness” (Heidegger 1989, 431; Eng. transl. 304). The thought of the beginning and its truth, therefore, reside in this twilight dimension. The very beginning inherent in the beginning is not limited to the rising but encompasses the opening of the space from dawn to dusk.

Finding the sunset in the rising: Heidegger expresses something similar when commenting on Hölderlin’s famous letter to Böhlerdorf of 4 December 1801, about the passage for the stranger in the experience of one’s own (cf. Heidegger 1980, 290-1; Eng. transl. 264). Again, this is not an unfair situation to be remedied by a return home (more or less possible), but a matter of making the stranger hospitable, finding oneself at home in not feeling at home. *Heimischwerden* does not mean coinciding with oneself (cf. Nardelli 2021, 137) nor being inured to one’s own language (cf. Giometti 1995, 20), but rather inhabiting the strangeness of existence, which is impossible (fortunately) to resolve, since it constitutes an essential trait of *Dasein*, its “Nicht-zuhause-sein” (Heidegger 1977a, 250; Eng. transl. 233). “From an existential-ontological point of view, the ‘not-at-home’ must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon” (252; 234); “human beings are initially, and for a long time, and sometimes forever, not at home [*nicht heimisch*]” (Heidegger 1984, 60; Eng. transl. 49).¹¹ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger accurately showed the domesticating and numbing character of being at home and *Vertrautheit*; to this is added the recovery of Hölderlin’s insight that homeland is *untergehende* (cf. Heidegger 1980, 122; Eng. transl. 110): one returns home setting, rather than residing and abiding. Any form of nostalgia for an original dimension of domestic peace must therefore be excluded. The experience of the origin, in the sense of the *Heimat*, does not occur in the *Heimkehr*, precisely because the return to the beginning coincides with the moment of departure from it (cf. Heidegger 1981, 117; Eng. transl. 140).

¹¹ Capobianco 2010, 65 argued how, from the mid-1950s onwards, the *unheimlich* character of the human being is rather attributed by Heidegger to today’s age, dominated by calculative thinking. According to this view, Heidegger’s attitude towards being at home would change over the years.

Hence, when Heidegger expresses the importance of returning to the Greeks, it must be acknowledged that, at least in the years of *Contributions* and the courses on Hölderlin ('35-'42), when he developed his thoughts about the beginning, the goal is not to think 'Greekly', but to think one's own based on the foreign. What therefore passes for a critique of Heidegger, namely the appropriation of Greek texts (cf. Gregorio 2021, 122, 129), is in fact the declared intent of his thought.

3 **The 'Purity' of the Beginning: An Extralinguistic Question?**

Having clarified the complex structure of the beginning, the hypothesis of a translation in the sense of a more or less faithful return to the Greeks has been ruled out. Rather, to translate is to open the space of a distance, from which a replication to the source text can arise. It is now a question of assessing the possibility of this operation, concerning Heidegger's recalled statements on the impossibility of translation. Is the beginning perhaps untranslatable? Is it by any chance a set of extra-historical and extra-linguistic meanings, the existence of which decides the possibility or otherwise of translation?

In a well-known passage from *Parmenides*, Heidegger rules out words having anything like a "pure fundamental meaning" (Heidegger 1982, 31-2; Eng. transl. 21). The idea of a pure basic meaning, which is supposed to serve as a criterion for translations, is merely an erroneous assumption of logic – and of vocabularies (cf. Cattaneo 2017, 24). To it, Heidegger instead opposes a *Grundbedeutung der Wörter*, a fundamental meaning of words, concerning which is "their beginning" (*ihr Anfängliches*). Moreover, this fundamental meaning "does not appear at first, but at last" – confirming our analysis of the beginning – and "holds sway in a veiled manner" (*waltet verhüllt*) in words.

Even though Heidegger explicitly rules out the existence of unchanging meanings concerning changing languages, it is equally not ruled out whether the fundamental meaning of words is found in an extra-historical dimension, an unattainable origin. The sunset case inherent in the translation of *physis* with *Aufgang* should suggest that this "veiled manner" is to be understood as something lying beneath ordinary meanings without, however, thus making it a substance or a noumenon that is phenomenologically inaccessible. Nevertheless, it has been argued for a kind of cleavage between the original dimension of being and that of history and language (cf. Hrnjez, Illetterati 2021, 14-15).¹² The matter emerges with particular clarity

¹² Von Herrmann 2011, 221 thinks something similar when he claims that the "clearing lights up at a given time in the enowning forth-throw of a *historical* way of cleared-

within the translation debate: Heidegger would have thought that Being has something like an extra-historical residue, so any attempt to say Being is but a failed translation, i.e. an approximation. From this perspective, the inverse can also apply to every translation, insofar as the translation is itself an experience of distance and 'linguisticity', and thus it only distances Being into a dimension that can never be grasped. The remote character of the origin thus averts the possibility of translation, and at the same time, Heidegger's aforementioned sentences on the failure of translation merely 'place' (*setzen*) the origin in a 'beyond' (*über*).

However, this gives Heidegger's Being an extra-historical character that the very thought of the history of being – the great outsider in the translation debate – already denies by name alone. Furthermore, one evaluates the translation Heidegger speaks of based on a model of translation that Heidegger openly disagrees with, namely a change of linguistic guise concerning the content that knows how to stand in its pure nakedness (cf. Caramelli 2022, 3). For if one makes Heidegger say that this pure content does not exist, or it is inaccessible, nevertheless in this perspective one continues to consider translation as a supplement, which 1) fails insofar as it cannot find a body to cover and 2) yearns for this impossible operation, since that is what a dress is for. On the contrary, the genuine appreciation for Heideggerian thought of translation lies precisely in the rejection of this ancillary conception of translation, and language in general. Only according to logic can there be such a thing as a coincidence of linguistic horizons, yet from the impossibility of this Heidegger does not deduce the impossibility of translation, precisely because the sense of impossibility that his thought enforces is not that of logical impossibility. The impossibility of translation, therefore, refers only to a certain kind of translation, one that claims to be commensurate with the source text. If Heidegger's translation is related to error and impossibility, it is so in an entirely specific sense (cf. Heidegger 1989, 188; Eng. transl. 131). The same sense of error, like the more general sense of negation, has an ontological status that does not allow itself to be evaluated under the banner of lack and deficiency: they are rather *Holzwege*, that is, they make way for and inaugurate, rather than close. Consequently, the very impossibility of the other beginning actually opens up its innermost possibility. It may therefore be that when Heidegger speaks of the "shipwreck" (*Schiffbruch*) of translation (Heidegger 1979, 45; Eng. transl. 38), this presupposes the idea of a safe harbour, but this one must be in turn read

ness. So we have to distinguish between the lightening-clearing of being and the *Da* as the happening of a way of clearedness happening at a given time. The lightening-clearing itself *does not exhaust itself* in the historicity of the *Da* of *Da-sein* at a given time".

in the sense of the flat familiarity already condemned in *Being and Time*. Ultimately, to say that there are no correct translations is not to admit that there is an ideal of the correctness of the translation, but that correctness and goodness are not the criteria by which to evaluate a translation.

Therefore, from Heidegger's statements toward translation, one cannot infer a Greek concept of beginning in the sense of an unattainable, extra-historical origin. Rather, these statements should be understood as invitations to rethink the meaning of translation, and precisely from the concept of beginning, and thus entirely within the history of being, as shown here. The question now is whether, at any rate, the Greek beginning does not instead have an extra-linguistic character (cf. Nardelli 2021, 103). If so, even in this case the translation would end up being understood as an indispensable approximation, unable to cover the gap from an unspeakable origin.

Certainly, Heidegger repeatedly points out the difficulty of saying being, of "describing" it (cf. Heidegger 1989, 321; Eng. transl. 226; Nardelli 2021, 112), without directly mistaking it for an entity. As Nardelli has recently shown in an important work (Nardelli 2021), this difficulty, if not impossibility, decisively influences Heidegger's conception of translation, at the same time marking his distance from Derrida (64-9). However, this is a delicate point. It is indeed impossible for what Heidegger calls "representational thinking" to speak of being, since this is immediately hypostatized into a representation, i.e. captured and reduced to presence. Notwithstanding that, Heidegger does not believe that so-called "representational thinking" exhausts all of how human beings relate to being, so much so that in *Being and Time*, *Dasein* already understands its own being without thematising it. It is, however, above all in the texts on the *Ereignis* that, so to speak, the game is played. Indeed, *Ereignis* does not indicate the 'constant subtraction' of being, but rather just the opposite, namely that it is precisely in subtraction that the human being is called by being. The grand attempt of a text such as *Contributions* consists precisely in 'letting oneself be thought of by being', rather than turning one's thoughts to it: this is the meaning of the subtitle "Vom Ereignis". Therefore, Heidegger does not intend to exclude any relationship to the beginning, placing it who knows where.

This essentially transforms or should transform according to Heidegger, the meaning of thinking and saying, as well as that of translation. Saying never really disappears, not even during the transition between beginnings (cf. Heidegger 1989, 229; Eng. transl. 162), and this is because philosophy "is obligated to point out precisely through saying" (Fink, Heidegger 1986, 34; Eng. transl. 17). The fact that being is maintained about saying, shaping Heidegger's original conception of language and poetry, is fundamental to the question of translation. First, another argument in favour of the sup-

posed untranslatability of the Greek beginning is removed, namely the supposed extra-linguistic residue of being. Second, how being reveals its linguisticity provides further guidance for thinking about the beginning-translation nexus. In the *Ereignis* perspective, where thought thinks from being and the experience of belonging to it, speaking is no longer the performance of a subject but becomes the listening of a “naming” (*Nennung*, cf. Heidegger 1983b, 52-3; Eng. transl. 70-1). In *On the way to language*, the text where this new conception of language is explored, Heidegger writes that “naming does not hand out titles, it does not apply terms, but it calls into the word” (Heidegger 1985b, 18; Eng. transl. 198). The passage from *Parmenides* on the fundamental meaning of words thus acquires new light: the *Grundbedeutung* does not lie hidden somewhere but dominates words to the extent that it calls them to itself. In the case of the words of the beginning, this call is all the more evident if we understand it according to the dual movement of dawn and dusk. The one who is called returns and draws near, just as that which was previously manifested and opened returns to its initial dimension. The words of the beginning thus open Greekness and give it its beginning, but they must also be understood as a call, i.e. as something that repeats differently and to which they belong.

The beginning is thus fully linguistic; it claims words for itself in the sense of replication and sunset indicated above. Again, in *On the way to language*, Heidegger speaks of a “rein Gesprochenes” (1985a, 14; Eng. transl. 194), to which belongs an inceptual “completion” (*Vollendung*). It seems that this fullness is a richness of meaning, a “polysemous saying” in itself ordered and structured (cf. Fink, Heidegger 1986, 12; Eng. transl. 4). In this case, a translation could be what intervenes to unravel and make explicit these otherwise compressed meanings (cf. Growth 2017, 123-4).

To test this hypothesis, consider Heidegger’s interpretation of fragments III and VIII (vv. 34-41) of *Parmenides’* poem, especially concerning the relationship between being and thought (cf. Heidegger 2000c). The common belonging of being and thought is due neither to the fact that thought is also an entity (Heidegger 2000c, 239; Eng. transl. 81), nor to the fact that being, in the sense of objectivity, is constituted through representational thought (240; 82), nor to the non-sensible being of both (243; 84-5). Heidegger excludes these interpretative options, which have historically occurred as specific philosophies, based on his particular translation of *eon* as “duality” (*Zwiefalt*)¹³ (245; 86) of being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiende*), and

¹³ The word ‘Zwiefalt’ is not used in current German. ‘Duality’ better translates *Zweiheit*, which does not refer to the verb *entfalten*, to unfold, as the word *Zwiefalt* does. A better translation might be ‘twofold’ (in current German *zweifach*), where the duality

noein as “apprehending which gathers” (*versammelnde Vernehmen*) (242; 84), “taking heed of” (*in-die-Acht-Nehmen*) (247; 88). *Noein* is further approached as “saying” (*sagen*) in the sense of “bring forward into view” (*zum Vorschein bringen*), based on the *noein/logos* relationship expressed by the *pephatismenon* (VIII, 34) (249; 90). *Legein* and *noein* are thus translated as “letting what is a present lie before in the light of presencing” (*lassen Anwesendes im Licht von Anwesen vor-liegen*) (255; 96 slightly modified). Thus, according to Heidegger, the ‘equivalence’ of being and thought should actually be re-translated as an unfolding of *Sein* and *Seiende* distinction held together by the participle ‘seiend’ (cf. Zarader 1986, 133).¹⁴ In the gathering of the participle, there is the gathering proper to the *logos*, which thus gives *noein* that to which it can pay attention (cf. Heidegger 2000c, 250; Eng. transl. 90).

This brief example too shows how the dimension of origin is not played out on an extralinguistic level: on the contrary, the very presence of *logos* demonstrates the opposite. Indeed, the wealth of meanings of the *rein Gesprochenes* is that “original reunification” (Gregorio 2021, 148) that characterises the collection of *logos*. A word like ‘*noein*’ holds within it a great complexity of meanings: thought, representation, apprehension (*Vernhemung*), but also *phàsis* (cf. Heidegger 2000c, 252; Eng. transl. 93), and *doxa* (258; 99). Therefore, *noein* can be considered in its own right as a perfect example of a *rein Gesprochenes*, whose progressive unravelling of the meanings is not to be understood as a progressive impoverishment and exhaustion: “in philosophy no word or concept is overused” (Fink, Heidegger 1986, 128; Eng. transl. 76). However, how can there not be an impoverishment if the translation intervenes to unravel the dense web of meanings of the words of the Greek beginning? It is clear that translation cannot act as a comb, as something that untangles, since it is precisely the knot of meanings that makes the initial words, because, as we have seen, there is a beginning where there is the dual movement of sunrise and sunset, which in turn makes use of translation, in a sense that remains to be discovered.

Along with the saying, there is surely something that remains obscure (cf. Nardelli 2021, 139). Nevertheless, even if one were to understand it as an “unsaid”, as Heidegger does, this is in no way to be

that is named must be seen in the light of the fold that divides the two elements, and which in Heidegger’s interpretation of Parmenides’ fragment III is *to auto*. The English translators also follow this solution. Moreover, Heidegger (1977a, 345; Eng. transl. 260) believes that the entire history of the West rests on the translation of *eon*.

14 *Seiend* is another translation of *eon*; we could then claim that *seiend* is the translation occurring on the way of dawn, as it is the German translation of the Latin *ens*, whereas *Zwiefalt* moves on the way of dusk, in that it implicitly goes back to the origin of the division underlying ontological difference thinking.

understood as “saying nothing”: “there is a saying to which the unsaid belongs, but not the unsayable. The unsaid, however, is no lack and no barrier for saying” (Fink, Heidegger 1986, 89; Eng. transl. 52). Indeed, the unsaid remains within the realm of saying, and it is precisely translation that underlines its linguisticity since it is in translation that the obscure and hidden element emerges. How?

It may be that the translation intervenes to make explicit, rather than divide, the meanings of the words of the Greek beginning already implicitly present in them. We can discard this hypothesis by looking again at Heidegger’s interpretation of Parmenides’ fragments. By translating *eon* with *Zwiefalt*, Heidegger claims that what unfolds (*Entfaltende*) remains hidden (245-6; 86-7). In the opening of the twofold to *noein*, *noein* is turned away from the *Entfaltende* (255; 96): it is not thought that sets out towards unfolding being, for rather it is a matter of ‘letting oneself be appropriated’ by being – again, *vom Ereignis*. This is not surprising: *Zwiefalt* is the opening up of ontological difference, which leaves its root unseen and sets up space for metaphysics. Furthermore, just as *ousia* and *aletheia*, the translation of *eon* also raises the question about a broader and deeper dimension, which in this case is the belonging of beings and being underlying the unfolding. The epochal and destinal sense of concealment revealed by the translation of *eon* is further accentuated by the presence of *Moirai* in fragment VIII: it is *Moirai* who has granted the twofold for *noein* (256-7; 97-8),¹⁵ and it is presumably *Moirai* who is concealed in the *to auto* of fragment III, read by Heidegger as a subject splitting into *noein* and *einai* (254; 95). However, the concealment of the origin of unfolding is not, on closer inspection, something made explicit by the translation. *Zwiefalt* translates *eon*, but this is at the level of the first beginning: it is instead the other beginning that is charged with the question of the origin of unfolding. Moreover, if the concealment was always implicit in the *eon* and the translation merely makes it explicit, then one would have to ask whether the *eon* also implicitly contains its replication. However, this is an absurdity, because in this case, the reply would not be such, since it would not diverge from the meaning of the *eon*: it would rather be part of it.

Even the meaning of ‘being implied’ is something unclear. Heidegger’s translation does not simply bring to the surface something that has remained covered. If this were the case, the meaning of his translation would be the same as Hegel’s translation of Parmenides’ *noein* with ‘thinking’ (cf. Heidegger 2000c, 241; Eng. transl. 82-3). In doing so, Hegel completes something only sketched out by the Greeks, while Heidegger explicitly distances himself from the mean-

¹⁵ According to Heidegger, if *noein* is directed to that which is unfolded, it cannot be directed also to that which unfolds.

ing of Hegel's translation. Stepping into the wake of a pre-existing but still implicit and interrupted meaning does not lead to that sunset in Heidegger's particular sense, but only to a viewpoint that is "later" (Heidegger 2000c, 244; Eng. transl. 85).

Only in a beginning that comes first, rather than at the end, can meanings be implied and be made explicit by the translation. However, Heidegger's beginning invokes a different theoretical framework, where the translation is called upon to play a far more important role than mere explication. Indeed, if it is not a matter of discovering something already present in the Greek words, then the meanings and replications that translation allows are somehow to be considered the fruit of a creative operation. 'Creation' here certainly does not mean 'introduction of something new', because, as we have seen, the meanings opened up by translation are not arbitrary, insofar as they allow for replication. Translated words are bound to the original text, that is, they are the first, initial step towards its other. The source text thus becomes such, that is, an initial text, only as a result of the operation of translation. It is then the translation that makes the beginning, and is itself the beginning, as creation.

4 Questioning the Greek Primacy: The Time-space of Translation

Once the structure of the beginning has been clarified and the hypotheses of its extra-historicity and extra-linguisticity have been ruled out, it is now a question of further investigating the creative movement of translation, underlying its being inceptual.

We have already seen how this movement is not of the type of trans-lating, i.e. trans-*ducere/über-tragen*, because this can only result in a paraphrase, i.e. a simple trans-position of what is said – which is never the *rein Gesprochenes* – into another linguistic guise. It has also been seen how the translation of the Greek beginning moves between *Aufgang*, the opening of *physis*, and *Untergang*, its closure/custody. The interstice between these two moments is the space of divergence that constitutes the *Scheidung* of Being, and in it is constituted the *Übergang*, i.e. the passage to the other beginning, as a reply to metaphysics. In the German word *Übersetzung*, Heidegger emphasises above all the *Über-*, rather than the moment of "position" (*Setzung*), because it is precisely this arc between sunrise and sunset that characterises both the translation and the beginning (cf. Heidegger 1979, 44-5; Eng. transl. 37-8).

Certainly, the "in-between" (*Inzwischen*) characterizing translation indicates the difference between the source text and translating language. This means that a good translation makes the specificity of one's own language felt in its confrontation with the other. In light

of the aforementioned adage “learning one’s own through the stranger”, to translate is always to translate oneself (cf. Nardelli 2021, 163). However, it is not just about this: by translating *eon* with *Zwiefalt*, Heidegger is not simply re-appropriating his own language but is at the same time marking a distance, and not from pure Greek experience, but from what is sundered in it. Indeed, it is not just a matter of removing from oblivion the space of difference that characterises the whole of metaphysics, but rather of asking the question about its origin. The in-between space of translation is thus as much a movement of approaching as it is of distancing, a return to one’s own language that passes through the foreign language and from which one regains distance. Distancing itself from the unfolding of the beginning, the homeland/the origin is given a future.

In *Contributions*, both the conjunction of these movements (Heidegger 1989, 237; Eng. transl. 168) and the dimension of the in-between (63, 223, 263; 44, 156, 185-6) is called “time-space”. The presence of space-time is a further confirmation of the historical and linguistic character of the beginning. In fact, if the initial dimension is spatio-temporal, this means that the beginning is not relegated to some transcendence or unattainable dimension, but is precisely in space and time, just like us: that is why it can grasp us and touch us. Moreover, Heidegger states that the particular saying addressed to the truth of being moves precisely in the fragment of the *chiaroscuro* dimension of *Lichtung*. Indeed, the experience of being called takes place between the distance of the called and the closeness of the caller, which has been seen to be the naming of the words of the beginning in their belonging to the *Grundbedeutung*. This structure of proximity and distance, beginning and end, light and dark, sunrise and sunset, is central to Heidegger, and thus also characterises the movement proper to translation.

The connection between space-time and translation becomes clear through the image of the river, as Heidegger speaks of it in his lectures on Hölderlin. Indeed, translation opens up an interstice between the source text and the translated one just like rivers both separate and hold together two banks (cf. Heidegger 1984, 46; Eng. transl. 39). This interstice is not only spatial: Hölderlin’s rivers make turns and go upstream in the direction of the source, theirs is thus a movement that also extends in time (cf. Nardelli 2021, 139). After all, a good translation brings one closer to the source text, perhaps otherwise unattainable, but also allows one to appreciate its distance, which in the case of the words of the Greek beginning is also and above all a temporal distance. Taking up another suggestion by Heidegger, the land that the river embraces, i.e. the space-time as the in-between of translation, is the dimension of dwelling, that intermediate dimension between the consuming source and the flat familiarity. Time-space, with its “crests” and “abysses” is precisely what

breaks the dimension of flatness and levelling (cf. Heidegger 1989, 236; Eng. transl. 167). In time-space, time and space interpenetrate each other, forming a “crossroads” (*Überkreuzung*) (Heidegger 1989, 192; Eng. transl. 135) that, according to Heidegger, is at once the intersection of the proper and the alien in Hölderlin (cf. Heidegger 2000b, 346). Therefore, translation is also intertwined with the question of dwelling, insofar as it helps to undermine the familiarity of the everyday dimension. Indeed, everyday familiarity is not the dimension proper to the human being, insofar as it is often able to be opaque concerning the dynamism of existence. However, translation is capable of revealing in what is most familiar to us, such as our own language, a foreign dimension, which breaks the obtuse certainty of everyday relations and invites us to come to terms with the otherness that crosses them, to dwell on the meanings of words in common use, where these bear traces of foreign languages and their experiences.

The reference to time-space may sound very abstract, far removed from the practice of translation. However, this is not the case: think of the space between words, the pauses and restarts that generate the rhythm of a line, and the echo of sounds that the poet emphasises. This time-space juncture is directly involved in translation and indeed is sometimes its emblem. Where the words are betrayed by a dubious translation, which is nevertheless able to preserve the underlying rhythm, perhaps making it resonate in another key, then somehow the translation has succeeded or, to say it better, the translation can restore the divergence between the source text and the translated one. Otherwise, when there is a perfect correspondence between the words and yet the rhythm is completely absent, the translation may have not failed, but only if it is reduced to mere transposition of words.

In what sense, however, is a translation successful, according to the premises of Heideggerian discourse? That is, how is a translation able to be initial, i.e. to articulate that complex dynamic of proximity and distance that constitutes the possibility of replication? The reference to metre and rhythm reveals a decisive aspect, valid in general and not only for the translation of poetry. Indeed, what is decisive is the broader spatio-temporal structure, which marks the rhythm of a poem and makes the more general dynamics of Heidegger’s translation possible. The movement of the beginning back onto itself opens up another beginning, the fragment placed between the extremes of this dynamic, in which a broader dimension is opened up to investigate words such as *aletheia*, *ousia*, and *eon*: all of this is nothing other than the same structure, which we call space-time here based on what has been said so far. We will now see how Heidegger thinks about the success of a translation precisely from what this structure allows, and also how its formality allows one to dare to take a step beyond Heidegger.

First, it has been seen that translation is a creative act, rather than a corrupting practice and that the meaning of this creation lies not so much in the introduction of an element of novelty nor in an explication of an already existing element. It is now a matter of recognising the proper object of this creation: not so much an isolated meaning, such as *Unverborgenheit*, but rather an entire 'world'. It is the world that is created, not an entity. Here, the world is understood in a broad sense, both as an articulated network of meanings and as an existential dimension in which the dwelling of the human being is rooted. So, the world revealed by the translation of *aletheia* with *Unverborgenheit* is the twilight world of the first beginning, the world in which we dwell in the transition to the other beginning. A translation is successful, so to speak, if it is then able to create a world, that is, if it can open up a dimension that can constitute an epoch-making turning point. But why precisely a world, and what does it have to do with the structure of space-time? Because Heidegger himself writes that the world "bursts" in the *Unterschied*, that is, in the space-time that unites and at the same time divides the two sides of translation (cf. Heidegger 1985a, 25; Eng. transl. 205). For this reason, *Unterschied* serves as a measure (23; 202). In translation, it is therefore a matter of "transforming" a world (cf. Fink, Heidegger 1986, 87; Eng. transl. 51).

As can be clearly seen, the translation does indeed address Greek words, but what is decisive for its dynamics is this space-time structure. In other words, one can recognise the formality of the structure of the beginning, now asking whether this same structure can somehow also function when addressing non-Greek words. After all, we have seen that it is not so much the Greek element that makes the beginning, but rather (its) translation.¹⁶

Heidegger's blows against Latin translations have already been recalled (cf. also Heidegger 1977b, 8; Eng. transl. 6), and there is no doubt that Heidegger favoured confrontation with the Greek, even at the expense of other traditions (cf. Nardelli 2021 226-7, 240). This is also understandable if read within a great tradition in German culture, namely that dating back to Luther (via Hegel) and his critique of Latin translations (cf. Caramelli 2022, 5-7). Furthermore, it has been rightly noted that if the exclusivity of the comparison with

¹⁶ This is the only point of divergence from Zarader's otherwise fully followed investigation (1986). In fact, Zarader states that original signification and plurivocity is something peculiar to the Greeks (162). However, by recognising such a peculiarity in the Greek language, the creative aspect of translation is downplayed and, at the same time, an imbalance is introduced between the two languages in which translation moves. There is little point in distinguishing between *commencement* and *origine*, if it is then the Greek words that are given their original meaning. Here, however, the origin is not located in the Greek language, but in the dimension of translation.

the Greeks is justified by Heidegger concerning Hölderlin's dialectic proper/extraneous, then the Hebrew tradition, German's true 'other' rather than an all too familiar Greek, should have been called into dialogue (cf. Di Cesare 2016, 258-9).

However, it must be now recognised that in the translation of the 'Greek beginning', the emphasis does not so much fall on 'Greekness' (cf. Nardelli 2021, 100) as on the 'beginning': it is never a question of returning to the Greeks but rather beyond them (cf. Heidegger 1985a, 126; Eng. transl. 38), considering that the pre-metaphysical is not the post-metaphysical (Fink, Heidegger 1986, 110, 113; Eng. transl. 65, 67), that is, the beginning comes last rather than first.¹⁷ What is fundamental, in fact, for something to be a beginning, is first and foremost the spatio-temporal dimension of the game between sunrise and sunset, the identification of a crossroads from which both unfolding and retreat depart: this is the beginning. However, if the beginning consists of this (at least: the being-first of the first beginning), then Greekness (and any *Volk* in general) is not a necessary condition for rethinking history from the beginning. Rather, 'it is sufficient' for translation to be able to detect a distance capable of opening up a world.

Look at then the case of the Latins: is there not a profound distance from them too? Yet, this is already not the same as saying that if the origin is always other, then it is in the experience of the otherness that the origin can be grasped. Distance alone is not enough for something like the beginning that Heidegger speaks of to occur: something must begin, unfold, and at the same time, within the retrospective gaze opened by the translation, something else sets in, opening up the possibility of another beginning. Consider now the translation of *ratio* with *Grund*. Heidegger himself has reflected at length on the gap between the two, there is an analogy here with the translations of *eon*, *aletheia* and *ousia*: just as *Zwiefalt* opens up the possibility of thinking the origin of unfolding, *Unverborgenheit* *Verborgenheit*, and *Anwesenheit* *Wesung*, *Grund* opens up that of *Abgrund*. And this Latin sunset is no less intense than the Greek one because for Heidegger *Abgrund* expresses the same essence of truth, that is, the *Lichtung für das Sichverbergens* (cf. Heidegger 1989, 380; Eng. transl. 265).

¹⁷ The judgement is not so clear-cut, so much so that Fink attributes to Heidegger the idea that the post-metaphysical is "included" (*enthalten*) in the pre-metaphysical, a point on which Heidegger glosses over, even if he has previously asked whether the two should be kept separated or not. Of course, the question is complex, because one would have to reflect on the meaning of this 'inclusion'. The beginning has in itself the seed of metaphysics and at the same time that of its overcoming, for this reason, it is a beginning, yet a distinction must be made between the moments of unfolding, of rising, and that of retreat, of setting. This distinction, which is of course reminiscent of the distinction between being and entity, must it in turn sunset? Or must the dismissal of difference be understood as a 'moment' within the waning of the beginning?

According to the idea of temporality discovered in *Being and Time* and transposed into a being-historical view, it would be rather superficial to state that the Latins are not ineptual 'because they come later' as if the dynamics of the beginning could be read within a consequentiality that for Heidegger is the result of historiography. Moreover, in the before/after relationship lies the sense of causality (cf. Kant KrV B 247 A 202), therefore one must be very careful in thinking 'non-historiographically' about the primacy of what comes first. To think that what comes after is somehow the betrayal and corruption of what comes before is to do, in terms perhaps more Heideggerian than Heidegger himself, (bad) historiography. What is more, to admit that the Latin *veritas* 'depends' on the Greek *aletheia*, rendering a distorted image of it, implies disavowing the whole potentiality of translation as an experience of otherness and the role it plays in the experience of its own – in this case, the Latins' own experience of truth. It is precisely this discontinuity in history, incomparably more complex than the idea of degeneration in translation, that is Heidegger's best argument for contesting Aristotelian Thomism and, perhaps, the history of metaphysics in general, which is thus not the compact block that Heidegger sometimes gives the impression of thinking, with oversimplification.

The translation of *veritas* with 'correctness' opens up at the same time the whole field of what is not straight, normal (orthogonal). As in the case of *Abgrund* and *Verborgenheit*, the crooked and curved space does not only come to light as the opposite of what is straight but rather as that broader and more varied dimension, about which the straight is merely an emergence, a specific case, the appreciable and fully experienceable apex. Compared to the twisted, the upright can impose itself: when the line becomes upright, it becomes the norm and dictates the norm, just like *Unverborgenheit*. Furthermore, the geometric trait of *veritas* yields an experience of time-space (of translation) that is perhaps more articulated than *Unverborgenheit*, which primarily comprises the chiaroscuro dimension and the play of light and shadow, while righteousness explicitly refers to the straight and the curved, closer to the complex relationship between distance and proximity characterizing time-space itself. This raises the question of whether, compared to *aletheia*, *veritas* does not make the dimension of time-space more experienceable. This would not be so surprising, given that *veritas* is more embedded in the translation dynamic than *aletheia*.

But there is more. Not only could one try to turn the formal structure of the beginning to words other than Greek, to see its initiation. The translation itself here translates itself, that is, leading into a space capable of distancing us from Heidegger and replicating him. As we have seen, Heidegger's conception of the beginning rests on the image of dawn and dusk. This is reflected in the practice of

translation, which is thought of as the experience of the *Zwischen* that runs through the two movements of the beginning. However, it must be recognised that this fundamental motif depends on the *physis* and its translation with *Aufgang*: the beginning is such in the translation of *physis* with *Aufgang* and the translation is the beginning. Nevertheless, this in no way implies that the spatio-temporal dimension of translation should be exclusively thought of in terms of dawn and dusk, unfolding and folding: neither in general nor in the specific case of the beginning. The brief foray into the space-time opened up by the translation of *veritas* with correctness has in fact shown a similar structure to that of *aletheia*, with the difference, however, that whereas here the chiaroscuro dominates, there the right/wrong dialectic dominates. The sense of distance that characterises the time-space of translation can also take place in other ways. Indeed, for an object to be taken out of the realm of familiarity, arousing a sense of distance, it can also be decontextualised, or be broken – for example by the practice of hyphenation. In short, it does not have to be something that emerges from the shadows or fades into them: to think in these terms is still to think within the experience of *physis* (cf. Chiareghin 1993, 100). What possibilities would a translation space be articulated according to the straight and the curved open-up?¹⁸

The translation is indeed a creative process, all the more so when it is thought of as a translation of the beginning. It is then not a question of the richness of a specific language, but rather of the poet who knows how to listen to it and, perhaps even more so, of the translator, who knows how to give voice to further meanings in the dialogue with his own language, opening up new avenues of meaning. In some ways, the *Dasein* itself, as *Zwischen* and “crisis between beginnings” (Heidegger 1989, 295; Eng. transl. 208) is a translator.

5 Conclusions

As we have seen, when the problem of translation in Heidegger is approached from the perspective of the beginning, it not only allows us to avoid certain impasses, e.g. the supposed untranslatability of Greek thought but also opens up new questions, which can perhaps even lead beyond Heidegger.

On a broader account, the question of translation not only testifies to the influence that Heidegger continues to exert within a broader

¹⁸ Some of Visentin's essays, even very distant from Heidegger's thought (see e.g. Visentin 2015), offer in their own way an example of how the straight and the curved can be employed as philosophical categories, inter alia to think the same truth.

current debate, that of the ‘Translation Studies’, as it also seems to confess a demand of his readers that has not yet been satisfied, namely the need to translate his language, so peculiar, into one that is not so much more familiar to the everyday dimension, but at least to that of an academic context. In other words, to investigate the possibility Heidegger granted to translation is to be able to bridge or not bridge the distance of his language from ours and to understand the reasons for this. After all, this is a question felt by Heidegger himself, for example in the famous protocol to the conference *Was ist das – die Philosophie?*, now finally available in its entirety (cf. Heidegger 2022, 422; De Gennaro 2002, 482-3).

Nevertheless, translation seems to play a very circumscribed role in the debate on the Heideggerian legacy. While Heidegger’s reflections on translation are appreciated, at the same time they are often completely ignored as soon as it comes to translating Heidegger’s own texts. Either the ideal of perfect adherence to the original is thus immediately rehabilitated, or the translation hypothesis is expelled, keeping the original German. In both cases, it is on the thoroughness of the reader that one relies on. Yet, the urgency of a ‘Heideggerian language’ is perceived, invoking translation.

Take the case of the English translation of the *Beiträge* – an untranslatable text? – by Emad and Maly, followed in just 13 years by another translation, that of Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012). The latter is surely more readable, especially for non-native speakers, but is in many ways a negation of what has been said so far about translation. Just think of the choice of rendering *Ereignis* with the familiar ‘event’, instead of the strange ‘enowning’. This ignores for instance Heidegger’s complex work of intralingual translation – the same as Heraclitus concerning Hesiod (cf. Fink, Heidegger 1986, 81; Eng. transl. 47). Heidegger’s language carves a furrow within the German language that, paradoxically, the foreign reader may feel while the native speaker does not, as was also the case with a careful reader like Gadamer, who did not fully grasp the specific meaning of *Ereignis* (cf. Schalow 2011, 180).

So Heidegger did not speak German? Claiming the existence of “the language of the thinking of and by being”, “which belongs neither to German nor to English nor to Greek” (Schalow 2011, 186), reopens the risk of the extra-historical origin, about which translation is entire “contingent” (Kovacs 2011, 194). Furthermore, to justify the hypothesis of a “third language”, a kind of continuity must be introduced, whereby Heidegger’s *Wesung* would be the *aletheia* of the *Greeks* (cf. Emad 2021, 70-1): again, a nucleus of truth that only occasionally appears in history, neglecting the creativity of translation. In general, intralinguistic translation presupposes a split between the language of thought and the vulgar that is rather questionable, even by Heidegger himself. A convincing move could then be to see the

language intralinguistically translated by Heidegger as the mother tongue (cf. Cattaneo 2017, 31). In this case, the translation from the flat, common language would lead not to a third language, but rather to the maternal one – somehow ineptual.

The question of translation in Heidegger is thus an excellent key to addressing complex issues that go beyond the specific horizon of Heideggerian philosophy, proving the broad philosophical scope of translation. The metaphor of the sowing and the river present translation as fertile ground, not only for thought but also for human dwelling, in a world, understood both as tradition and dialogue among different languages.

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In the Workshop of the Translator Walter Benjamin in/on Translation

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Abstract Taking as its starting point Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*, the paper provides insights on both his theory of translation and some of the translations of this essay. In doing so, the author lets the readers enter both Benjamin's and her translator's workshop. This process leads to a reflection at a metalevel on the dialectical tension between translator and translation, highlighting a hiatus between the experience of translating and the process of thinking about it. Translation emerges as a process of metamorphosis that lets the original survive in new forms, making us aware that the concept of an absolute singularity does not have any reason to exist, both for works of art and for our life. Thus, translation offers a privileged observation-point from which to reflect upon the concept of "life", subverting one of the most stable categories of Western philosophy, one which is often taken for granted: the concept of subjectivity. Through the concept and the practice of translation, we become aware that every text, as every existence, is the result of a series of encounters and collisions and should therefore be considered only from the dimension of plurality.

Keywords Difference. Hybridisation. Plurality. Translation's theory. Translation's practice.



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Not long ago, I found myself driving a car that was not mine in a city that was not my own. I switched on the radio. A famous translator was speaking about her work.¹ Intrigued by what she had to say while she was already quoting an author, I suddenly felt part of the story that she was telling. “I think that it should be in the library of every translator, other than in his/her memory”, affirmed the translator. Even more curious, I waited until she revealed the book about which she was speaking. It was a novel by an Italian author, Michele Mari, entitled *The Black Arrow* (2009), where a child (perhaps the young author) is speaking in the first person. He narrates how, after having completed the reading of a book by Robert Louis Stevenson in its Italian translation, he received as a present by his father a second copy of the book. Being in awe of his father, the child doesn’t reveal to him that he has already read the book, starting therefore to feel guilty and somehow ill at ease, until he suddenly realizes that the book covers are different. The child hurries up to open the books, looking for their incipit and notices with exultation that the two incipits do not coincide and thus initiate two different stories, respectively: “Nel pomeriggio di una tarda primavera le campane della fortezza di Moat House risuonarono a un’ora insolita” and “In un pomeriggio di primavera ormai inoltrata, le campane del castello di Moat-House suonarono a un’ora strana”.² “At this point”, says the child “I was safe”.

The simple remark of the difference between the two Italian translations of Stevenson’s book is what lets the child feel safe, and, together with him, every translator. Translation can thus have “salvific” effects. And this simply because a translation in the singular form doesn’t exist, but only translations in the plural exist.

Some translations grow out of the ones that preceded them, but not in order to correct them. Languages are living beings in constant metamorphosis and, by virtue of translations, the so-called originals can “survive”. This concept brings us to Walter Benjamin’s oeuvre, and in particular to what he states on the concept of “survival” in his well-known essay *The Task of the Translator* (*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*) (cf. Benjamin 1991a; 2017; English translation: Benjamin 2004).

Before facing this topic, I would like to further dwell on the threshold of the text (or perhaps, instead of “to dwell”, it would be more appropriate to use the German verb *zögern*, which is even

¹ The translator, Susanna Basso, was recalling her book *Sul tradurre. Esperienze e divagazioni militanti* (Basso 2010).

² “In the afternoon of a late spring the bells of Moat House fort resounded at an unusual hour” and “In an afternoon of an already late spring, the bells of Moat-House castle rang at a strange hour” (Author’s transl.).

more permeated by the coexistence of movement and stop typical of thresholds). *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, one of Benjamin's most philosophical texts, was written as an introduction to his translation of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* one hundred years ago, between 1921 and 1923. Hundred years after Benjamin's publication and sixty years after Renato Solmi's well-known Italian translation (cf. Benjamin 1991c), I am working on a new translation of the essay with a critical apparatus (cf. Costa 2023) Benjamin's text was written as a forward, but it does not have an introductory function to Baudelaire's book, which is not even quoted in Benjamin's essay. *The Task of the Translator* deals with the topic of translation and, in particular, of literary translation. There is a hiatus between translation and discourse on translation. Benjamin wants to show us that there is a deep abyss between the theory and practice of translation, or better between thinking and experiencing translation. This hiatus is revealed by Benjamin's writing which deals with translation without offering any concrete examples.

The essay's title contains between its letters the signature of this hiatus. The central theme here is not the figure of the translator, but rather the translation itself. Writing a premise without any introductory function and a title that do not refer to the text that enunciates it, Benjamin shows a dialectical tension between translator and translation, between the experience of translating and the process of thinking about it (cf. Berman 2008, 35). Through this rhetorical device, he distances himself from traditional treatises on the topic, offering a critical redefinition of the translation. As that tradition underpins, its task (*Aufgabe*) is also not a mere transferal of meanings. Neither it has to do with the ethic sphere of responsibility. It is neither matter of responsibility nor of obligations. The German verb *aufgeben* indicates, on the one hand, the idea of giving (*geben*), of fulfilling, of executing a task; on the other hand, it implies the idea of renouncing, of giving up, of closing, for instance in its extreme use in the expression *seinen Gast aufgeben*, which is synonymous with "to die". The word *Aufgabe* is therefore characterized by this very polarity. Associated with the term "translation", it almost indicates a task whose outcome is uncertain. In Benjamin's use, it recalls the realm of the German Romanticism, where the term *Aufgabe* was strictly related to the term *Auflösung* (solution), to be intended seemingly as a logical, chemical and musical solution. In the German Romanticism, the dialectic between task and solution is played out in four ambits where the language 'fulfils' or realizes itself: philosophy; poetry; critics; and translation (cf. Novalis 1954, 22. On this topic cf. Berman 2008, 41). Benjamin is looking for a "solution" in the order of language, a solution to the original dissonance which is inherent to the sphere of language. In particular, he aims to critically redefine translation, differentiating it from poetry and critique.

But let's go back to the concept of survival. Following Benjamin, the link between an original and its translation is a bound of life, or better of afterlife (*Zusammenhang des Überlebens*).³ The German term *Zusammenhang* is a common term, but it contains a clue, the signature of the liminal space which – as we will see in the next pages – is the dwelling of the translation: the space “in-between” can be experienced only together (*zusammen*), it is a common space, a space of *mélange*, of hybridization (cf. Costa 2012). Translation is the “form” that the original acquires in its metamorphosis (cf. Benjamin 1991a, 9). In this sense, the figure of echo – one of the many metaphors that recur in Benjamin's text – reveals itself as decisive in order to understand the core of Benjamin's concept of translation.⁴

The echo is a complex figure of resonance that cannot be reduced to the repetition of a stable entity. It deals with a process of transferring that occurs *through* and *via* resistance. This structure seems to be paradoxical, in that the translation highlights that the concept of an absolute singularity does not have any reason to exist, both for works of art and for our life. It is exactly in this passage that the essential relation – that should not be intended in a metaphorical sense (cf. Benjamin 1991a, 11) – between translation and life arises. I think that this essential link has offered Benjamin a privileged observation-point from which to reflect upon the concept of “life,” thus subverting one of the most stable categories of Western philosophy, one which is often taken for granted: the concept of subjectivity. Languages are not simply more longeval than human beings, but also more malleable and subjected to metamorphosis.

A ‘surplus of life’ stands in opposition to the mortality of both author and reader, which Benjamin defines as afterlife (*Überleben*), and which confines the works, together with their languages, to a posthumous and migrating existence. Benjamin employs only once the term *Überleben*, and uses in the following section the term *Fortleben*. In introducing the concept of survival, he chooses the term *Überleben*, since this term express the idea of a surplus, whereas *Fortleben* alludes to a mere temporal prosecution, a transformation (cf. Berman 2008, 86). One should also not forget here the use that one of Benjamin's contemporary, Aby Warburg, made of the concept of survival as *Nachleben* (cf. Warburg 1999).

The language remains, states Benjamin, but it is in constant movement. From this perspective, it is not so important who the author

³ Cf. Berman 2008, 86. The influence of Jewish thought through Scholem's mediation is evident here. The “messianic” aspect of translation is also at the center of Derrida's reading of Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*. Cf. Derrida 1985; 1987, 203-35.

⁴ For a reading of Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* through the figure of echo cf. Costa 2012, 25-40. On translation as echo cf. also: Nägele 1997, 10.

of a text is, since beyond every signature, every text is the result of a series of encounters and impressions that originate from a plural being (*Pluralwesen*).

Every change, every metamorphosis, takes place through the repetition of something original, which should not be intended as a model to be imitated or reproduced (that is, reading translation as a search for equivalences between languages). A good translation is rather able to keep the balance between languages; it is the form according to which “a foreign work reaches us as foreign. In approaching and making accessible the work to us, the good translation maintains this element of foreignness” (Berman 1984, 200; Author’s transl.). Thus, we are not dealing with a mere transfer of meaning where the smallest amount is lost, as a long tradition argued and still argues.

The act of translating is not a linear path, but contains constant interruptions, caesura, deviations, inaccessible zones, which sometimes limit the way. Every translation is like a process of giving birth, with the pain and discomfort associated with it. Together with its translator, a translation should be prepared to host the ‘other’, without being afraid of entering in the life of languages, in their metamorphosis, therefore allowing the process to alter the translation itself.

The act of translating can not only strengthen the so-called source-language, but also rejuvenate and rebirth the translation’s own language. The translator should act exactly where the original language is more foreign to itself and resistant to every change, where it shown harshness and points of apparent untranslatability, where it is more discontinuous and fragmented. It is precisely in these dark zones that constellations and unnoticed correspondences appear. The translator should listen to their feeble echo, without wanting to prevaricate it.

A good translation should not give the impression that it sounds as an original in its language, but on the contrary it should play in a continuous oscillation between proximity and distance, between similarity and dissimilarity.

All these images seem to allude to the aforementioned “life relationship” (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*) or “survival relationship” (*Überleben*). They show that in the transition from one language to another always remains something else, a surplus, something that precedes, a *Vor-leben*. Even if periods of latency were to succeed, languages would survive in a particular and diminished form, as *Nach-leben*. In this sense, one can claim that every language contains traces of what has preceded it. These traces remain mostly invisible, because they have assumed the form of oblivion – and in oblivion, as Benjamin teaches us, things appear distorted and unrecognizable.

The translator finds then his/her place in the segment in which a language transforms itself in another one, without the possibility to determine with certainty where is the border between the two. It is not about the passage from one language to another, but about the

crossing of a threshold characterized by blurred limits. The translator leaves it open for acting on it. The figure of the threshold is one of a dynamic cesura, which enables the source-text to come into collision with the target-text. From a logical point of view, one should not even speak about a source- and a target-text, because this would bring us to a linear and progressive concept of temporality. The time of translation is instead discontinuous, mixed, hybrid, because texts and languages are constantly subjected to metamorphosis.

After these premises, how should we translate Benjamin's texts? It would be unadvisable to offer both a literal and a free translation. Coming after a rich number of translations, I obviously insert my work in a well-established tradition of translation practices. If I look at this scenario from the outside, I notice that French translations situate themselves in the wake of the tradition of the *belles infidèles*, which bend the German text to a flowing French that avoids any repetition; English translations aim to communicate in the clearest manner a complex content, which is difficult to understand; Italian, Castilian, Catalan and Brazilian-Portuguese works seem to insert themselves in an intermediate way, which aims neither to distort Benjamin's text, nor to make it more accessible, but rather to show its complexity. I have selected this latter way, in line with the idea that a translation practice is a "repatriating bewilderment", a dipping in the shared water of the life of languages, in order to emerge as a different person. With time, my goal is to develop the so called "patience" of the translator. In this process, I wait for words to come to me, making myself listen to them. Enmeshed in this process, at times I notice that what Benjamin stated in quoting Hugo von Hofmannstahl about immaterial similarities (*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeiten*)⁵ can happen in real life: "To read what it never was written (*Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen*)".⁶ What does this quote mean? I would suggest to it as "do not rush in identifying correspondences", because our memory is sometimes able to put us in a disorienting situation of *déjà-vu*, in which we remember something that we did not experience in person.

Before concluding, I would like to approach the text directly. I am referring here to a critical passage, in the eleventh paragraph of *The Task of the Translator*, which is in the second-last sentence before the conclusion. Here, Benjamin offers a definition of the translator's task, using the term *Umdichtung*, which recurs only twice in Benjamin's oeuvre, respectively in the essay *The Task of the Transla-*

⁵ Cf. Benjamin 1991b; 1991e; Bernofsky 2001; Finkelde 2003; Gebauer, Wulf 1998; Kleiner 1980; Menninghaus 1995; Opitz 2000; S. Weigel 1997; 2001.

⁶ Benjamin quotes this passage coming from H. von Hofmannsthal's *Der Tor und der Tod in Über das mimetische Vermögen* (cf. Benjamin 1991e) and in the preparatory notes to the text *On the concept of history* (cf. Benjamin 1991d, cf. also the note by the editors at page 1238). On this quotation cf. Costa 2006.

tor, and in a letter to Gershom Scholem from 27 April 1925, referring to Calderon de la Barca. This term is extremely difficult to translate in the Italian language.

Below is the original text in German:

Jene reine Sprache, die in fremde gebannt ist, in der eigenen zu erlösen, die im Werk gefangene in der Umdichtung zu befreien, ist die Aufgabe des Übersetzers. (Benjamin 1991a, 19; 2017, 23 line 5)

Here is the text in Roberto Solmi's Italian translation:

Redimere nella propria quella pura lingua che è racchiusa in un'altra; o, prigioniera nell'opera, liberarla nella traduzione – è questo il compito del traduttore. (Benjamin 1991c, 50)

And here in my translation:

Redimere nella propria quella pura lingua, che è esiliata in una lingua straniera, prigioniera dell'opera, e liberarla "ripoetandola" [*Umdichtung*] è il compito del traduttore. (Benjamin 2023, forthcoming)

As the reader can see, in Solmi's translation the term *Umdichtung* disappears, as it is rendered with "traduzione" (translation). But how can a term that for Benjamin was so precious that he employed it only twice in his work be omitted and instead substituted by "translation"? If one reads only the second part of the text, one can infer that: "Liberare (la pura lingua) nella traduzione è il compito della traduzione".⁷ But how should it be freed? What is the power of translation?

The sonority of the term *Umdichtung* leads us to think of Heidegger's *Dichtung*, that is, to the interplay of light and shadow which is proper to a clearing. Benjamin would probably not have appreciated this digression. But what I want to express here is that we find ourselves again in front of the dimension of plurality. On the one side, Benjamin suggests that translation (or better, translations) enables the original to be re-born, to come back to life in another form; on the other side, when translating Benjamin's text, one becomes aware that no translation can be the definitive one, thus bringing us back to the 'salvific' function of translation.

⁷ "To free the pure language in the translation is the task of the translation" (Author's transl.).

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“Wie eine Äolsharfe vom Winde berührt” Translation in Walter Benjamin’s Early Writings

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Abstract The article aims at analysing the concept of translation in Walter Benjamin’s early writings, especially with reference to the essays *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (On Language as Such and on the Language of Man, 1916) and *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (The Task of the Translator, 1921) but also taking other contemporary writings into consideration. It is shown how the concept of translation, inextricably linked to Benjamin’s reflection on language, draws on the one hand on the hermeneutics of early German Romanticism and on its reflection on translation and on the other is charged with the entire semantics of Jewish messianism, in continuous confluences of which the concepts of pure language (*reine Sprache*), transformation (*Verwandlung*), of the unintentional (*intentionlos*) and the inexpressive (*ausdruckslos*) are the most evident precipitate.

Keywords Walter Benjamin. Translation. Language. Source language. Target language. German Romanticism. Messianism.

Summary 1 *Über Sprache überhaupt*: Adamic Translation. – 2 Semantic Proliferation and the Infinite Task of Romantic Hermeneutics. – 3 The Task of the Translator. – 4 Language Reversal and Silence.



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1 **Über Sprache überhaupt: Adamic Translation**

In mid-August 1916, Gershom Scholem spends three days in Seeshaupt, Bavaria, where Benjamin has been spending the summer with Dora Pollak. The two play chess and go over Socrates’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, discussing every topic under the sun, in particular Kant and German idealism. At the same time, Benjamin reads an ode of Pindar both in the original and in the famous translation by Hölderlin, while tracing an embryonic line of thought on language which best tolerates – now, but also later on in his life – the definition of *Sprachdenken* rather than that of *Sprachphilosophie*, which is more systematic and rigid due to its claim of being complete.

Once home, thinking back on the conversations he had in Seeshaupt, Scholem writes a long letter about language and mathematics to his friend (Eiland, Jennings 2015-16, 74-5). In a letter from Benjamin to Scholem, dated 11 November 1916, we learn that the answer – which Benjamin had formulated only a week prior – to the many questions posed by his friend in his previous letter – ends abruptly on page eighteen due to the far-reaching implications and the impossibility of outlining them briefly. To bring into clearer focus the subject at hand, Benjamin turns his letter into an essay, though he fails to address the relationship between language, mathematics and the Messianic idea, which he deems “unendlich schwer [...]” (“infinitely complex”, Author’s transl.) and, for the moment, beyond his ken. Benjamin thus reveals the subject of his forthcoming essay, while providing a short summary of it – “[das] Wesen der Sprache [...] in immanenter Beziehung auf das Judentum und mit Beziehung auf die ersten Kapitel der Genesis” (Benjamin 1995, 343)¹ – as well as its title, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (On Language as Such and on the Language of Man), which, he admits, makes a certain systematic attempt without, however, ridding the essay of its inevitably fragmentary nature, which Benjamin attributes to his still incomplete knowledge of the subject (Benjamin 1995, 343).

His famous and often arduous essay, which he likely wrote between 4 and 9 November 1916 and was left unpublished for a long time, first came out only in 1955 in a volume of Benjamin’s selected writings edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno (Benjamin 1955, 401-19). This is where Benjamin’s early observations coalesce for the first time to tackle the problem of language and – despite its troubled genesis, forever on the brink of veering off towards a larger work that was never to be and whose project would ultimately come to an

¹ “The essence of language [...] in immanent relation to Judaism and with reference to the first chapters of Genesis” (Author’s transl.).

end in the 1930s² – where he outlines a theology of language marked by gnoseological aspects or, in the words of Gianfranco Bonola, a “logo-ontology” (Marcelli 2015) which is, to some extent, still green, though at times vertiginously impenetrable. It does, however, contain the theoretical foundations of Benjamin’s hermeneutics of poetry, art and literature, at least from the early stages of his thinking through to *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (The Origin of German Tragic Drama).³

In *Über Sprache überhaupt*, already widely reviewed by the critics,⁴ Benjamin develops, on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis and the Kabbalistic theory he draws from via Scholem and Franz Joseph Molitor,⁵ a theological idea which places the origin of all spiritual manifestations in language, and which categorizes language by degree of purity and perfection, from the divine language of creation, to the pure Adamic name-language all the way to the language of man.

According to Benjamin, in the upper tiers, i.e., the divine tier of creation and perfect knowledge and the Adamic tier of nomination, language does not share anything with instrumentality, mediation of meanings or communicative intention, thus placing itself at the opposite end of the spectrum with respect to meaning and intelligibility, where purity stands out as vehicularity decreases and the logical nexus becomes frayed. Amidst the tangle of concepts of which the pages of *Über Sprache überhaupt* are the first precipitate – and cemented by the books shared and discussed by Benjamin and Scholem in addition to the works on Kabbalistic and, more general-

² Starting from 1916, through letters addressed to Scholem, Ernst Schoen and Herbert Blumenthal, Benjamin continues to write on language. This is a priority for Benjamin, who sees the core of his thinking in the essence of language and in the metaphysics of language. It is Benjamin himself who places several of his writings – from the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede* (Gnoseological Premise) of the *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* to the *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (On the Mimetic Faculty) annotations from 1933, along a spectrum of close affinity precisely in relation to the development and expansion of the same idea of language his 1916 essay was based on. For the genesis of the text and its recurrence across Benjamin’s various writings and letters, see comment on *Über Sprache überhaupt* in Benjamin 2008, 635-7.

³ For further details, see, Menninghaus 1980; Agamben 1983; Prete 1983; Schwenpenhäuser 1983; Tedesco 1993; Vitiello 1996; Bröcker 2000; Carchia 2000; Moroncini 2000; 2009; Alberts 2010; Tagliacozzo 2016; Gurisatti 2018.

⁴ See Montanelli 2014, 182-95; Ponzi 2014; Tagliacozzo 2014, 304-28; Tagliacozzo 2016.

⁵ Along with the discussions with Scholem, the four-volume and incomplete work of the idealist philosopher, theosophist and Freemason Franz Joseph Molitor, the *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* (Molitor 1827-55) is the source Benjamin draws from his knowledge of Jewish mysticism. With Scholem, right before drafting *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin will examine several passages from Molitor’s work, which aspires to a *sub specie mystica* amalgam of Judaism, Christianity and idealistic philosophy.

ly, Jewish topics – are the proto-Romantic writings (or, in any case, Counter-Enlightenment writings) on the language of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Georg Hamann as well as a logical, gnosological and mathematical line that crosses Kantianism, neo-Kantianism (especially as based on Hermann Cohen, Heinrich Rickert and Ernst Cassirer), phenomenology (particularly in its Husserlian filiation), and the logical-mathematical line of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and Henri Poincaré, whose writings Scholem studied more deeply than Benjamin (Tagliacozzo 2014, 313).

In the pages of *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin reveals his interest in translation, which he considers as a genre in its own right, with full status and dignity, and which is not ancillary to other forms of the text, but rather, halfway between literary creation and philosophical speculation. In 1916, while developing and modulating – at the confluence of romanticism and *qabbalah* – the concept of primordial language, where word and thing are consubstantial and perfectly adherent to one another,⁶ Benjamin dwells on the concept of translation: the Adamic *nominatio rerum* carries, according to Benjamin, a silent entity towards its sound configuration and this movement is, quite literally, a *translation*. A passage from the inaudible to the audible, from the nameless to the name. By a translational process, man receives from God the mute and nameless language of things and translates it into sound, into a name-language: “Die Sprache der Dinge kann in die Sprache der Erkenntnis und des Namens nur in der Übersetzung eingehen” (Benjamin 1972, 152).⁷ In doing so, Benjamin therefore invites us to consider translation not only as an interlingual dynamic, but also as an intralinguistic process, as a profound and foundational structure of the language:

Es ist notwendig, den Begriff der Übersetzung in der tiefsten Schicht der Sprachtheorie zu begründen, denn er ist viel zu weittragend und gewaltig, um in irgendeiner Hinsicht nachträglich, wie bisweilen gemeint wird, abgehandelt werden zu können. (Benjamin 1977, 151)⁸

⁶ The idea of language in Benjamin – at the first level of creative and intradivine spirituality and, soon after, in the round Adamic compactness of the name-language – revolves around an ontological core and is defined as a deep gash into essence, in a continuity of thought that also leads to Rosenzweig and Heidegger who, along with Benjamin, share similar thoughts on primordial language and its substantiality.

⁷ “The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation” (Benjamin 1996, 70-1).

⁸ “It is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought, as has happened occasionally” (Benjamin 1996, 69).

The fall of the tower and the ensuing *confusio linguarum* therefore gives rise to a plurality of translations, as many as there are languages: "Soviel Übersetzungen, soviel Sprachen, sobald nämlich der Mensch einmal aus dem paradiesischen Zustand, der nur eine Sprache kannte, gefallen ist" (Benjamin 1977, 152).⁹ The passage from the mute language to the name-language is, therefore, a transformation and a change of forms. In a word, a metamorphosis. Indeed, in Benjamin's view, translation opens up to "ein Kontinuum von Verwandlungen" (Benjamin 1977, 151).¹⁰ For now, in *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin only makes a cursory mention of the transmutation that language at its highest stage – Adam's imposition of the pure name – entails or of the promise of transformation it inherently holds.

It is clear that Benjamin's early interest in translation is the result of the study of early Romantic literature, in particular of Friedrich Schlegel, which began in 1916 and grew in the summer of 1917, during his stay at the sanatorium in Dachau, and which he funnelled into his doctoral thesis *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (The concept of criticism in German Romanticism), presented in 1919 before the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Bern. To be sure, the Romantics focused heavily – both speculatively and practically – on translation, and it is therefore worth returning briefly to the Romantic idea of translation to better contextualize how this fed into Benjamin's thought on language and translation.

2 Semantic Proliferation and the Infinite Task of Romantic Hermeneutics

In early Romantic aesthetics and theory of art, translation occupies a place of paramount importance. While the classics of European literature, from Shakespeare to Dante to Calderón to Petrarch, reach the German readership in translation thanks to the great and remarkable foresight of August Wilhelm Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, translation undergoes a conceptual extension, acquiring a philosophical dimension.¹¹ It is the communicative acts themselves – whether oral or written – that are considered, first of all by August Wilhelm Schlegel himself, as acts of translation. Indeed, vis-à-vis the partial views Hamann and Herder already expressed in the late Enlightenment, translation must be poetic, saving – as far as it is possible – not only the meaning, but also the form of the original text. According

⁹ "So many translations, so many languages – once man has fallen from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language" (Benjamin 1996, 71).

¹⁰ "A continuum of transformations" (Benjamin 1996, 70).

¹¹ On translation in German Romanticism, see Kofler 2006, 3-13 and Nicoletti 2002.

to Friedrich Schlegel, one of the founders and perhaps the greatest theoretician of early German Romanticism, translation is an integral part of the encyclopaedic, unattainable project set forth in the well-known fragment 116 of the magazine *Athenäum* for a *progressive Universalpoesie* (universal and progressive poetry). As for this project, translation confirms – through the infinite and asymptotic approximation to the original which is inherent in translation – its character of endless becoming and necessary incompleteness. With philology, according to Romantic theorists, translation shares exactness and scientificity, adding an artistic value to it. Translation is involved in the Romantic utopia, in that "augmented and enhanced reality" which is always engaged – in a process that is both idealistically transcendental and self-reflective – in the pursuit of apparently tangible goals that are always elusive, thus ultimately becoming a self-involved discourse that falls back onto itself. A desire of desire, a poetry of poetry, a translation of translation. In a word, unending semiosis. From this dual perspective, since language is already in itself a poetic and creative translation of reality and poetry is a metaphorical representation of the world, literary translation becomes in turn – according to the lesson of the *Kunstlehre* (The Doctrine of Art, 1801-02) by August Wilhelm Schlegel, in the self-reflexive and metalinguistic meaning – "Poesie der Poesie" ("poetry of poetry") (Schlegel 1963, 226).

Similarly, with Novalis, the literary translator becomes "Dichter des Dichters" ("poet of the poet"; (Novalis 1993, 384) in fragment 68 of the famous collection of aphorisms titled *Blüthenstaub* (Pollen 1798). Along the same lines, according to the brilliant interpretation of Peter Kofler (2006, 5), translation in the Romantic era ceases to be governed by the logic of replacing source words with equivalent words in the target language, but it is understood instead metaphorically as a continuous hermeneutic act which opens up to perspectives of polyvalence and semantic proliferation. The shifting character (*Verschiebung*) of the metaphor – the displacement of a term from one domain to another with the resemantization it causes – clearly concerns Romantic theoretical activity and speculation. Likewise, translation, understood as a metaphorical process, causes, quite literally, the displacement of a text from one cultural episteme to another, thus bringing about an effect comparable to metaphorical estrangement, altering the structure and expanding the expressive possibilities in the target language. Just as a metaphor must show its origin in order to be alive and effective, so too Romantic translation must be retrospective, i.e., looking back on the pre-text, to recover those traits of the original that can cause an estrangement effect – or even obscurity, albeit a productive sort of obscurity – in the target language:

E se la metafora, in quanto predicazione insostituibile, produce un plusvalore semantico, un sapere nuovo o addirittura una realtà prima inesistente, anche alla traduzione deve essere attribuita una funzione cognitiva, epistemologica, perfino demiurgica. (Kofler 2006, 4)¹²

The pellucid project for total translatability, which had underpinned Enlightenment thinking, is thus replaced in the Romantic era by the principle of inherent obscurity, fragmentation and substantial untranslatability which, nonetheless, paves the way to new possibilities of signification, evoking the form of the original, reflected in the translated text. Hence the idea, which is central to Romantic hermeneutics, that translating and even more so understanding are never guaranteed from the start, but are based on the endless task of continuing to understand and of always understanding differently.

Every hermeneutical act therefore originates from extraneousness and lack of understanding; knowledge is the result of misunderstanding and the potential obscurity of a text, which must be accepted and respected in the way it presents itself. And which must be left obscure, should that be the writer's intention. Before a scientific, objectifying and grammatical analysis is conducted, the subjective-comparative-divinatory method must be adopted in addition to focusing on the creator, the analysis that goes back to the source, to the set of experiences – thoughts, feelings, intentions – from which the writing originates, together with empathy and the identification (*Einfühlung*) with the text. In short, the sense of identity comes from and depends on being able to tell the difference. Each interpreter must necessarily go through the foreign and extraneous constitution of the text to convey new meaning and a new discourse. This is the trajectory of Romantic hermeneutics, from its canonization in Friedrich Schleiermacher to its last filiation in Wilhelm Dilthey at the end of the nineteenth century.¹³

The Romantic theory of language thus asks the translator not to render the content expressed in the source language in the forms of another language, but to reproduce – perhaps more suitably while maintaining all its demiurgic component, i.e., to recreate – the same

¹² "And if the metaphor, as an irreplaceable predication, generates a semantic surplus value, new knowledge or even a previously non-existent reality, then translation, too, must be given a cognitive, epistemological, or even demiurgic role" (Author's transl.).

¹³ One cannot help but refer here to Antoine Berman's brilliant study *L'épreuve de l'étranger. Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique* (1984). According to Berman, who elaborates in his work a veritable modern theory of translation *sub specie philosophica*, the perspective on translation can – better than other approaches – scrutinize the German cultural tradition as it probes the deep and tormented relationship German culture has with what is 'extraneous', foreign and, in general, with otherness.

effect caused by the original text on the reader. The translator is therefore urged to react to the inherent indeterminacy and obscurity of the source text with an equal degree of obscurity and fragmentation in the target language or, in other words, to avoid smoothing out what is rough in origin. If, as Cesare Giacobazzi (Giacobazzi 2017, 81) strongly emphasizes, the elimination of obscurity in the Enlightenment paradigm is an indispensable condition in translation, the only premise and guarantee that makes the transition possible – that *Übergang* that played a major role in Kant's later works, especially in his third Critique – from one language to another, thereby emphasizing the universal and cosmopolitan concept – first and foremost of the Enlightenment – of linguistic and cultural mediation, the Romantic idea of translation stresses the need for a "valorizzazione dell'oscurità" (Giacobazzi 2017, 81; "setting value on obscurity", Author's transl.) which must not be removed in the transition from one language to another. This perspective rids us of the illusion of a full and total understanding, of a linearity without any residue, granting full legitimacy to that irreducibly obscure part which is consubstantial with language and which cannot be eluded.

With Walter Benjamin, the Romantic idea of translation results in one of the most direct and explicit filiations (Guarnieri 2009). While giving the Romantic episteme a Jewish slant to which we will return later, Benjamin inherits both the content and the fragmentary form from the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and other Romantics. A prose which tends to be rhapsodic and incomplete, often paradoxical, underpinned more frequently by implications, implicit references and logical leaps rather than by perspicuous associations. The contiguity with early Romantic theories is evident, for example, when in *Über Sprache überhaupt*, language is defined in its immediate, magical and infinite character.¹⁴ As regards the name-language,

¹⁴ Especially in Schlegel, language takes on the features of a self-absorbed mystical grammar, circular in its pneumatic self-reflection, where form is content and content is form. An infinite grammar, whose end resides in itself, which is oriented to the sum of its parts, to totality: "Magie ist mystische γρ (Grammatik)" – states Friedrich Schlegel in fragment 376 – "und scheint immer auf Totalität zu beruhen". (Menninghaus 1980, 29; "Magic is mystical γρ (grammar) and always seems to be based on totality", Author's transl.). Likewise, in the pages of *Über die Sprache*, the name-language communicates the spiritual essence without reservation and in its entirety. Thus this gives rise to that "intensive Totalität der Sprache" (Benjamin 1972, 151; "intensive totality of the language", Benjamin 1996, 65), a clear Romantic reference that shows, in the utmost density of the name, the intensity of an essential word, the increased purity of a communication without fractures and extended to infinity in its possibilities of combination. The infinite combinatorial chain of this grammar metonymically leads to the Kabbalistic method and it is Schlegel himself who declares, in the brevity of the formula, the equivalence "Kabb(ala) γρ1 / 0 (unendliche Grammatik)", Schlegel 1963 in Menninghaus 1980, 29; "Kabb(ala) γρ1 / 0 (infinite grammar)", Author's transl. Or again, in an annotation from 1812: "Die kabbalistische Grammatik sehr zu studieren. Es ist dar-

Benjamin radicalizes the Romantic assumption. Because it adheres immediately to things, the pure name-language does not tolerate mediation, pitting itself against any transfer of information. The result being that communication itself – understood as linguistic and informational *transfer*–¹⁵ is sidestepped and denied. In *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin strips any legitimacy from the act of communicating *through*,¹⁶ from transmissive communication, from what he calls "die bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache" (Benjamin 1977, 414).¹⁷ After the fall of Adam and the tower – two episodes Benjamin ties metonymically together and which he considers in the same plane – the single language becomes fragmented and multiplies in the chaotic dispersion of multiple languages. Starting from the disobedience of Adam and the arrogance of the builders of Babel onwards, language becomes communication, mediation, and intentionality. For Benjamin, on the contrary, the name-language is an absolute and uncon-

in etwas Wundervolles in dem Bau der Sprache verborgen" (Schlegel 1995, 358); "The Kabbalistic grammar is to be studied very much. There is something wonderful hidden in the structure of the language", Author's transl. Up to the clear aesthetic turn that Romanticism imparts to the Kabbalah, a modulation expressed by Schlegel, without uncertainty, in a 1802 note contained in *Fragmente zur Poesie und Litteratur II* (Fragments on poetry and literature II): "Die wahre Ästhetik ist die Kabbala" (Schlegel 1991, 305); "The true aesthetics is the Kabbalah", Author's transl.

15 "Nicht, was an einem geistigen Wesen mitteilbar ist, *erscheint* am klarsten in seiner Sprache, wie noch eben im *Übergange* gesagt wurde, sondern dieses *Mittelbare* ist unmittelbar die Sprache selbst" (Benjamin 1977, 42); "Not that which *appears* most clearly in its language is communicable in a mental entity, as was just said by way of *transition*, but this capacity for communication is language itself" (Benjamin 1996, 63-4). The italics "Übergang" and "transition" are mine, other italics can be found in the editions referred to. In this denial of the linguistic transition, a challenge to and refutation of Kantian ideas are recognisable. In 1916, the year *Über Sprache überhaupt* was written, Benjamin attended Moritz Geiger's lectures on the *Critique of Judgment* in Munich during the summer term. The concept of *Übergang* ("transition") from the sensible to the supersensible and from theory to practice occupies Kant's later output, starting precisely with the third Critique. For reference, see Kant 1908, 175-6; It. trans. by Gargiulo, Kant 1997, 21. Nonetheless, the true Kantian year for Benjamin is perhaps 1918, when, together with Scholem, he grapples with the Kantian filiation in the Marburg School while reading *Kant's Theory of Experience* by Hermann Cohen (Cohen 1871 It. Trans. by Bertolini, Cohen 1990), resulting in a detachment and critical stance. Also published in 1918 is *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* (Program of the coming philosophy, Benjamin 1977b, 157-71, It. trans. by Moscati, Benjamin 2008, 329-41), a project aimed at revising the whole Kantian system.

16 "Was teilt die Sprache mit? Sie teilt das ihr entsprechende geistige Wesen mit. Es ist fundamental zu wissen, daß dieses geistige Wesen sich in der Sprache mitteilt und nicht durch die Sprache [...] Das geistige Wesen teilt sich in einer Sprache und nicht durch eine Sprache mit – das heißt: es ist nicht von außen gleich dem sprachlichen Wesen" (Benjamin 1977, 142); "What does language communicate? It communicates the mental being corresponding to it. It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language [...] Mental being communicates itself in, not through, a language, which means that it is not outwardly identical with linguistic being" (Benjamin 1996, 63).

17 "The bourgeois conception of language" (Benjamin 1996, 65).

ditional word. It spreads out instantly and it communicates immediately. It does not convey meaning, nor does it mediate significance.

The pure name-language of Adam is therefore without *intention* and without *expression*, thus foreshadowing two concepts which, between 1916 and 1921, i.e., between *Über Sprache überhaupt* und *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, come to the fore on several occasions.¹⁸

The name-language is attached to things. It does not bind things to one another. As such, it is an *inside*, not a *through*, not an *over* or an *across*. It is therefore in this sense that the famous distinction made by Benjamin at the beginning of *Über Sprache überhaupt*, between *Mittel* and *Medium*, between mediated and medial, between the vehicular-instrumental function of communication and the language that communicates itself immediately must be understood. Almost as if Benjamin – who, at this juncture, is Kantian under many respects, though still markedly divergent – recognized in the language itself – the language that speaks in the name and that in the name grasps the essence of the thing – a new formula for the *Ding an sich*.¹⁹ A formula imbued with the European philosophy of language – Frege

¹⁸ As far as the ‘inexpressive’ is concerned, the early fragment from 1919 *Analogie und Verwandtschaft* (Analogy and Affinity, Benjamin 1985, 43-5, It. trans. by Boarini, Benjamin 2014, 39-41) is worth mentioning. In this fragment, written in the years that separate the two essays on language (1916 and 1921, respectively), the *ausdruckslos* (inexpressive) category first appears before taking centre stage in the subsequent essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, (*Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, Benjamin 1974; 2008, 523-89). Regarding the unintentional (*intentionslos*) several annotations date from the 1910s and the 1920s. The rejection of the *intentio*, of the communicative aim, is an integral part of Benjamin’s early thinking on language; it will continue to be so even after the two essays of 1916 and 1921, for example in the lapidary and almost apodictic fragment of 1923 “Diese Sprache der intentionslosen Wahrheit (d.i. der Sache selbst) hat Autorität” (“This language of intentionless truth (i.e. of the thing itself) has authority”, Author’s trans.), where the linguistic-metaphysical idea is transferred into the domain of politics or political theology (*Zum Thema Einzelwissenschaft und Philosophie* [On the theme of single science and philosophy], Benjamin 1985b, 50-1, trans. it. by Schiavoni, Benjamin 2014, 45-6). Later, in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German Tragic Drama), the “death of intention” (*der Tod der Intention*) will be asserted several times and categorically, Benjamin 1974b, 203-430, It. trans. by Cuniberto, Benjamin 2001, 69-269. Benjamin’s reflections on the concept of intention – as well as on the concepts of denotation, meaning, and logic – also reveal his close confrontation since the late 1910s with the contemporary philosophy of language. As mentioned above, Benjamin’s logical-mathematical interests represent a precise debt of the German philosopher to his friend Gershom Scholem, who had attended some lectures given by Gottlob Frege at the University of Jena. Traces of the two friends’ discussions remain in a number of fragments from 1916-17, such as *Das Urteil der Bezeichnung* (The Judgement of Designation) and *Lösungsversuch des Russelschen Paradoxons* (Attempt to solve Russel’s paradox), where Benjamin tries to offer a solution to Bertrand Russell’s paradox, in antithesis to his thought. See Chitussi 2013, 143-54; Oliva 2014, 211-25; Palma 2014, 226-40.

¹⁹ To set himself apart from Kantian gnoseology, and perhaps foreshadowing the aesthetics of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Benjamin uses the term *Sache an sich*, rather than Kant’s *Ding an sich*.

and Wittgenstein above all²⁰ – but especially with the Kabbalistic interpretation and its meditation on the Name, which Benjamin receives through Scholem.

Be that as it may, with his idea of the original language (*Ursprache*) – a concept halfway between the Romantic and the Kabbalistic, in which word and thing belong together²¹ – Benjamin does away with

20 See Tagliacozzo 2003; Stern 2019.

21 The notion of the Adamic and primordial language, supra-individual and meta-historical, is developed by Kabbalistic thinking. As Gershom Scholem maintains, the Kabbalists reflect – while developing the subject further and variedly – on the biblical and Talmudic concepts about the origin of the world from the divine word, starting from the assumption that a metaphysics of language does not start only with esoteric currents of Jewish thought but it is inherent in the Torah itself, since the concepts of creation and revelation, in their metaphysical dimension, possess an essentially linguistic nature (see Jacobson 2003, 123-8). The idea of language as a vehicle for creation is already present in what is considered the oldest Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (The Book of Illumination); subsequently, creation as a hermeneutic act is further articulated in the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Splendour), the *locus classicus* of the Jewish *qabbalah*. In the Zoharic imaginary, the line that crosses the triad God-Torah-Israel, bringing its components together, is the ontological status bestowed on Hebrew, which is not only the language of the creation of everything, but also the real *Ursprache*, the primordial language that reveals the intimate substance of being and does not allow reproduction by any other language, not even by Aramaic, considered by some medieval thinkers to be of equal importance and identical value. Later, in his attempts to summarize and categorize the different Kabbalistic schools, Mosheh Cordovero sees in the language of the *Torah*, which in itself contains all creation, the result of a chain of transformations starting from a primordial and hidden language in which the deep structure of reality is anchored and which would be subject to changes through the ages. Cordovero's theory posits a linguistic and ontological correspondence between language and the world that are mutually determining. Although not a linguistic theory of creation in and of itself, the Lurian Kabbalah sheds further light on language as the vehicle and instrument of creation and as the ultimate substance of the world. The three constitutive moments of Lurian cosmogonic dynamics (*shevirat ha-kelim* [breaking of the vessels], *tzimtzum* [contraction] and *tiqqun* [restoration]) can in fact be read and interpreted within a linguistic frame. The interpreters of Yizchak Luria, especially Mosheh Chayim Luzzatto, further develop Lurian theosophy by accentuating its linguistic component. In the kabbalistic *imago mundi*, the word of God revealed in the Hebrew language is a preliminary condition not only for human thought and action but, from a historical and cosmological perspective, for creation itself, along the lines of a universal hermeneutic built on a divine *Ursprache*. The *qabbalah* therefore distinguishes a mythical, suprahistorical, original and uncorrupted language – the language spoken by God to Adam – and, one step below, biblical Hebrew, a residue of the primordial language and an attenuated reflection of that first, unreproducible expression, but first among historical languages to approximate the perfection of pure language. The status assigned to Hebrew is bolstered in the 15th and 16th centuries and the Christian *qabbalah* – from Johannes Reuchlin to Christian Knorr von Rosenroth – continues to reflect extensively on the Adamic language and on its absolute rank of transparency and purity which Hebrew comes closest to than any other human language. The same concepts, especially in relation to Hebrew as a 'pure language' (*reine Sprache*), are resumed during the 19th century, feeding into the philosophy and aesthetics of early German Romanticism and idealism, especially from Franz Xaver von Baader and Franz Joseph Molitor whose interests focus on theosophy, Christian mysticism and Jewish Kabbalah in an attempt to connect Christianity with *qabbalah* while striving for a higher form of knowledge and greater harmony resulting from this synthesis. In addition to the discussions and intellectual exchange with his friend

logical-rational discursiveness, with instrumentality, the vehicularity of language and, in an even more radical manner, with signification. In short, pure and authentic language has nothing to do with the mediation of content and communicative intention.

As regards the transformative and metamorphic capacity that translation – if understood correctly – can bring to bear, Benjamin completes his whole discourse five years later in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, which explores the concept to its outermost boundaries in a perspective that is no longer only intralinguistic but also interlinguistic, and where the metamorphic value of translation, its insertion into a messianic dynamic aimed at anticipation and redemptive approximation, has clearly been brought into focus. In 1923, Benjamin prefaces the German version of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* with an introduction entitled *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (The Task of the Translator), which he had written two years earlier and which shows, more clearly than ever, the convergence of Romantic thinking on language and Kabbalistic thinking.

3 The Task of the Translator

As early as 1916, in *Über die Sprache*, Benjamin's writing begins to show an embryonic discourse which, among its core ideas, includes the withdrawal of the rational sequence, the disconnection from the logical link, the decline of syntax. And as early as 1916, in a consequential manner, Benjamin had focused on the concept of translation. Based on the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt – an anthology of whose works he had planned but never fulfilled – Benjamin, too, develops the notion – kabbalistic from a Hebrew stance, proto-Romantic and Romantic from a German stance – of *Ursprache*, the original, superindividual and meta-historical language, of which the translation – if understood correctly – can attempt to recapture a glimmer. In his essay on translation *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, the term *Ursprache* does not appear: here Benjamin writes extensively about the *reine Sprache*, 'pure language' though he always intends it as the name-language and Adamic language, where words and things are co-essential, which he had already dealt with five years earlier. In *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* – an essay critics have equally devoted much attention to ²² – Benjamin claims that:

Scholem, Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* is the source from which Benjamin draws his notions on Jewish tradition, theology and mysticism, and the mould from which the concept of *reine Sprache* originates. See also Grözinger, Dan 1995; Kilcher 1998; Goodman-Thau, Mattenklott, Schulte 1999; Mertens 2001.

²² Drumbl 2003; Bartoloni 2007; D'Urso, Muzzioli 2011; Abel 2014; Costa 2014; Ponzi 2014.

Vielmehr beruht alle überhistorische Verwandtschaft der Sprachen darin, daß in ihrer jeder als ganzer jeweils eines und zwar dasselbe gemeint ist, das dennoch keiner einzelnen von ihnen, sondern nur der Allheit ihrer einander ergänzenden Intentionen erreichbar ist: die reine Sprache. (Benjamin 1972, 13)²³

Translation – connecting languages despite their fundamental and radical extraneousness – is, according to Benjamin, an attempt to approach the pure and primeval language. An attempt at harmonizing and repairing the linguistic fracture, where the messianic glimmer is in full view. An attempt that only a literal translation, not a free one, can bring about, and where the most distinctive trait is the transition – as far as it is possible – of the morphological, syntactic and lexical features of the foreign language into the target text, while triggering metamorphic processes in the target language.²⁴ In order to adapt to a foreign linguistic form, to receive it within itself, the target language inevitably has to twist its own structures and stretch until it becomes virtually disfigured. It is therefore quite clear that every language is left with "ein Letztes, Entscheidendes" (Benjamin 1972, 19).²⁵ At the bottom of every language lies something that cannot be transmitted through words. This is the ultimate essence, the core of pure language. A hidden and fragmented nucleus forced into the meshes of individual languages, which only translation can release by moving between them:

²³ "Rather, all suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language" (Benjamin 1996b, 257).

²⁴ An analogous idea of translation, to be realized through the absolute and literal rendering of the original, so as to change the connotations of the resulting language, is put forward, three years after the composition of *Die Aufgabe*, by Franz Rosenzweig in the afterword to the German translation of the poetic corpus of Yehudah ha-Levi (Rosenzweig 1924, then 1984, 81-100, It. trans. by G. Bonola, Rosenzweig 1991, 143-63) and subsequently in the translation of the Hebrew Bible, carried out with Martin Buber from 1925 to 1929. Embedded in the Rosenzweigian idea is Romantic hermeneutics, primarily the particular slant Friedrich Schleiermacher gives to the concept of translation in his famous speech given in 1813 at the Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin, from which Rosenzweig will draw the conceptual bifurcation between the practice of *Dolmetschen* and that of the real *Uebersetzen*. See Schleiermacher 1838, 207-45 and Askani 1997, 114-24. On translation, a few decades after Benjamin and Rosenzweig, Heidegger himself formulates a number of common ideas, especially on translation viewed as *über-setzen*, "to bring to the other side", while infusing the spirit of the source language into the target language. Just as Rosenzweig had criticized Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf's translation of the Greek tragedy, in his tendency to simplify and modernize, Heidegger criticizes Hermann Diels' translation of pre-Socratic philosophers.

²⁵ "Some ultimate, decisive element" (Benjamin 1996b, 261).

Die reine Sprache gestaltet der Sprachbewegung zurückzugewinnen, ist das gewaltige und einzige Vermögen der Übersetzung [...] Jene reine Sprache, die in fremde gebannt ist, in der eigenen zu erlösen, die im Werk gefangene in der Umdichtung zu befreien, ist die Aufgabe des Übersetzers. (Benjamin 1972, 19)²⁶

The mission of translating and the task of the translator are therefore aimed at helping develop the extent of incomprehensibility, inexpressiveness or absence of meaning in the target language, which are the hallmark of pure language and which are contained in the source language – the 'other' and 'foreign' language by definition – which must be wholly transferred into the target language. Authentic translation – Benjamin argues – is therefore transparent, but not in the sense of linearity, comprehensibility and clarity of structures. Indeed, it is more opaque than crystal clear. Its transparency is rather an attempt not to cover the original, not to cast a shadow on it, thus allowing the light of the pure language to fall on the target language, or at least some of its oblique rays or sparkles. In this sense, translation must be 'extreme' and as literal as possible and must not come to compromises, adaptations, adjustments to merely facilitate understanding.

In the same breath, Benjamin proposes a literalism that can measure how translation, in the name of pure language, can effectively break the target language apart, while removing its constraints and extending its boundaries so as to create that necessary alteration and dissonance that helps the germ of pure language grow in translation ("In der Übersetzung den Samen reiner Sprache zur Reife zu bringen", Benjamin 1972, 17),²⁷ thus bringing harmony into being, "die große Sehnsucht nach Sprachergänzung" (Benjamin 1972, 18).²⁸ Translation certainly cannot reveal the secret relationship of original interlinguistic communion. However, it can represent it as "keimhaft oder intensiv" (Benjamin 1972, 12).²⁹ Benjamin encapsulates the embryonic linguistic commonality and the convergence of the multiple into one primordial language into the adverb *keimhaft*, ('embryonically' or 'in embryo'), where the messianic component is clear. The sprout – the main metaphor for offspring and for generation, the figure of utmost concentration, absolute density and maxi-

²⁶ "To regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation [...] It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" (Benjamin 1996b, 261).

²⁷ "Ripening the seed of pure language in a translation" (Benjamin 1996b, 259).

²⁸ "The great longing for linguistic complementation" (Benjamin 1996b, 260).

²⁹ "In embryonic or intensive form" (Benjamin 1996b, 255).

num potential for the future – has always been, ever since the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah from the Davidic line,³⁰ perhaps the most powerful image of the messianic dynamic. In the redemptive syntax, the adjective thus indicates the germinal moment, the element in formation, the prelude to an ultimate fulfilment, harmony in *statu nascendi*. A little further on (1972, 12), Benjamin also uses the term *Keim* (‘germ’, ‘sprout’, ‘embryo’) to indicate the hint of harmony that translation can foster when it tries to represent, without being able to produce it from scratch, the intimate and secret relationship between languages. In translation, therefore, according to Benjamin, the attempt to repair the linguistic fracture and to heal the post-Babel wound, while restoring the Edenic covenant is clearly evident. Interpreted as such, translation is therefore carried out in an intensive, allusive and anticipatory manner:³¹ the concept of anticipation of redemption in the now (*Vorwegnahme*)³² is, in turn, a recurring idea in messianic discourse and the intensive bond formed between language and language by translation, can bridge the lin-

30 Isaiah 11,1: “A shoot will grow out of Jesse’s root stock, a bud will sprout from his roots”.

31 “Eine intensive, d.h. vorgreifende, andeutende Verwirklichung”, (Benjamin 1972, 12); “intensive – that is, anticipative, intimating –realization” (Benjamin 1996b, 255).

32 In Rosenzweig, for example, the category of ‘anticipation’ (*Vorwegnahme*) is central in the formulation of the time-eternity link. While waiting for the fulfilment of time, man can anticipate tomorrow in today, eternity in the present. The concept of *Vorwegnahme* – which occurs for the first time in the essay *Von Einheit und Ewigkeit. Ein Gespräch zwischen Leib und Seele* (Of unity and eternity. A conversation between body and soul, Rosenzweig 1986, 65-78, then Rosenzweig 2002, It. trans. by Ciglia, Rosenzweig 1998, 923-40) and which is subsequently presented in *The Star of Redemption* – contemplates that the advent of the Messianic Kingdom can, indeed must, be anticipated. The future must be anticipated in the present, the Messiah must be made to come ahead of time (“das Herbeiführenwollen des Messias vor seiner Zeit”, Rosenzweig 1988, 253; “the bringing of the Messiah before his time” It. trans. by Bonola, Rosenzweig 1985, 244). Similar to the temporal categories of messianic anticipation is the Pauline Christian idea of a condensation of time or its contraction (ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος, “the time has been shortened”, 1 Cor 7:29) together with the passing of the form or figure of this world (παράγει γὰρ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, “for the present form of the world is passing away”, 1 Cor 7:31), especially as the end of time approaches. The matrix text, which is very productive for Benjamin, stems from a few Pauline verses from the *First Letter to the Corinthians* (1 Cor 7: 29-32), where the messianic life – marked by an indistinction in which every concept is simultaneously also its opposite – is contained in the formula ‘as (if) not’ (ὥς μή), a device which, according to the interpretation of Jacob Taubes (Taubes 1993, It. trans. by Dal Santo, Taubes 1997) falls directly on Benjamin’s *Theologisch-politisches Fragment* (Theological-political fragment) (Benjamin 1977c, 203-4; It. trans by Agamben, Benjamin 2008) filtered by the *als ob* nicht of Heidegger’s lectures on the phenomenology of religion (Heidegger 1995, It. trans. by Guri-satti 2003, 160). From the Pauline passage Benjamin draws the idea of passing (*Vergehen*), of an eternal sunset – the zone of indistinction *par excellence* – and of the transience of the worldly realm characterized by a continuous approximation and a constant approach to the messianic domain. See Stimilli 2004; Azzariti-Fumaroli 2015, 102-3; Stefanini 2018, 115-32; Guerra, Tagliacozzo 2019.

guistic difference, while retracing the path towards the original, now lost, linguistic unity. Brushing up against pure language – "die nichts mehr meint und nichts mehr ausdrückt", which is "ausdrucksloses Wort"³³ – ideas that Benjamin had already used in 1916 to define Adamic language – ideal translation, i.e., totally literal, extinguishes the linearity of the content and eliminates any communicative intention. Hence, the less translation aims at communication, the more value and dignity it gains. In fact, if understood as a redemptive tool and a means to universal understanding, as an anticipation of the messianic time, it must be – quite paradoxically – against communication and it must rid itself of "schwerer und fremder Sinn" (Benjamin 1972, 12).³⁴ The ideal translation, therefore, has zero degree of communication and a very high degree of harmony and messianic reconstitution by anticipating redemption. Deprived of meaning – this is the extreme implication – language inevitably proceeds towards its annihilation, though, in this way, it can perhaps reunite the fragments scattered under the tower of Babel and head, once again, towards the compact inexpressiveness and unintentionality of the Adamic language, bringing back messianically – again by the linguistic act of conjunction that underlies translation – the linguistic multiple to the essence of linguistic singularity.³⁵ In this union of languages, in the passage

33 "In dieser reinen Sprache, die nichts mehr meint und nichts mehr ausdrückt, sondern als ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort das in allen Sprachen Gemeinte ist, trifft endlich alle Mitteilung, aller Sinn und alle Intention auf eine Schicht, in der sie zu *erlöschen* bestimmt sind" (Benjamin 1972, 19); "In this pure language – which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative word, that which is meant in all languages – all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be *extinguished*" (Benjamin 1996b, 261; italics added).

34 "Heavy, alien meaning" (Benjamin 1996b, 261).

35 After mentioning, in *Über Sprache überhaupt*, the construction of the tower of Babel, its destruction and the consequent *confusio linguarum*, the Benjaminian argument, in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, proceeds contiguously with the cosmic drama of the breaking of the vessels, with clear references to the Kabbalistic figures of the *tzimtzum* (contraction), of the breaking of the vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*) and of the consequent restoration (*tiqqun ha-olam*). For a discussion of these figures, typical of Yizchak Luria's *qabbalah*, see Busi 1999, 390-7, 445-52; Idel 2004; Idel 2010. Through the mimetic approach and the mirroring of the source language in the target language, the authentic translation tends to obliterate interlingual diversity, allowing a glimpse of the pre-Babel language and contributing, metonymically, to the *restitutio ad integrum*, i.e., the realignment of the primordial fracture: "Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muß, anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich anbinden, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen. Eben darum muß sie von der Absicht, etwas mitzuteilen, vom Sinn in sehr hohem Maße absehen und das Original ist ihr in diesem nur insofern wesentlich, als es der Mühe und Ordnung des Mitzuteilenden den Übersetzer und sein Werk schon enthaben hat" (Benjamin

of one into the other, there is therefore no idea of order, of syntax, of transparent linearity. Rather, the image of a productive disorder, of an asyntactic chaos prevails once again. Indeed, by connecting languages while retracing the lost, primordial unity, translation – acting as a forerunner to redemption – goes through a disconnection of the logical and causal link and – as part of the redemptive dynamic – it triggers germinative and metamorphic-transformative processes in the target language. Until the "messianisches Ende"³⁶ of linguistic evolution is reached, the redemption of meaning through the har-

1972, 18); "Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. For this very reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense, and in this the original is important to it only insofar as it has already relieved the translator and his translation of the effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed" (Benjamin 1996b, 260).

36 "Bei den einzelnen, den unergänzten Sprachen nämlich ist ihr Gemeintes niemals in relativer Selbständigkeit anzutreffen, wie bei den einzelnen Wörtern oder Sätzen, sondern vielmehr in stetem Wandel begriffen, bis es aus der Harmonie all jener Arten des Meinens als die reine Sprache herauszutreten vermag. So lange bleibt es in den Sprachen verborgen. Wenn aber diese derart bis ans messianische Ende ihrer Geschichte wachsen, so ist es die Übersetzung, welche am ewigen Fortleben der Werke und am unendlichen Aufleben der Sprachen sich entzündet, immer von neuem die Probe auf jenes heilige Wachstum der Sprachen zu machen: wie weit ihr Verborgenes von der Offenbarung entfernt sei, wie gegenwärtig es im Wissen um diese Entfernung werden mag" (Benjamin 1972, 14); "In the individual, unsupplemented languages, what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux – until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning. If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language; for it is translation that keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation? How close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?" (Benjamin 1996b, 257). While talking about faithfulness to the syntax of the original text which must inevitably lead to an upset of meaning as it borders on unintelligibility, Benjamin argues that the communicative intention, therefore the meaning, should not be preserved but 'restored' on the basis of hidden and fundamental relationships. To illustrate this method, Benjamin uses the image of the realignment of the fragments, and the reunion of scattered splinters – a simile that, with analogous clarity, leads back to the tripartite dynamics of the Lurian *qabbalah* (contraction of divine energy – breaking of the vessels containing the light of God and consequent serious alteration of the cosmic balance and restoration-reintegration anticipated in the present but accomplished only in the fullness of time with the arrival of the Messiah). The realignment of the fragments, when anticipated by translation, must not proceed on the basis of relations of analogy or similarity between languages but according to the reproduction of the 'way of understanding' (*Art des Meinens*) that underlies the source language. The concept of *Art des Meinens* coincides, albeit partially, with that of 'signifier'; in addition to the acoustic image of the word, it includes the phrasal-syntactic structure of the source-language and its reproduction in the target language, the only process whereby traces of pure language may be glimpsed. One must therefore follow the edges and the sutures of the shards, the marginal lines of

mony of signifiers remains hidden, but in the present, it can be anticipated through translation which, thanks to its interlingual movement, creates a reflection of the *reine Sprache*, of which translation is the closest approximation. True translation is therefore a synthetic and metamorphic act, the creation of something totally new and, at first, foreign. A renewal by transformation which subverts categories by preparing or messianically anticipating new categories of meaning, where the disintegration of pre-existing configurations, the sudden burst of what is new and unconditioned, the categorical inversion,³⁷ the overturning of sensible experience and the coexist-

the fragments with the implicit, consequent creation of an equally fragmentary, sharp and terse language, tending towards implosion or explosion.

37 The messianic inversion (*messianische Umkehr*), with its technical and rhetorical use of the paradox, is one of the categories most used by Benjamin to envisage the dawn of a new time or its preparation, even beyond these early writings up to *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (Thesis on the concept of history). On the concept of 'messianic inversion' in Benjamin and on the Pauline framework underlying this idea, as well as on the demise of the communicative and informative role of language (*katárgēsis*), see the seminal study by Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 2000; Agamben 2007). Agamben points out (Agamben 2000, 74) that a Scholemian thesis, the eighty-third out of the ninety-five theses published in 1918 that Scholem himself wished to give to Benjamin as a present for his twenty-sixth birthday, reads: "Die Zeit des waw ha-hippukh ist die messianische Zeit", Scholem 1995, 295; "Messianic time is the time of the inversive waw", Author's transl.), where the reference is to the use, very frequent in biblical Hebrew, of prefixing a waw to a verbal form to reverse its temporal value from completed (past) to unfinished (future), and vice versa. It is hardly necessary to recall then how the figures of upheaval, of metamorphosis, of the reversal from negative to positive (*Umkehr*, *Umwandlung*, *Umschlag*), originating in the early Romanticism (Friedrich Schlegel widely uses the term *Umschlag*), are central to the discourses of cultural renewal, to the Jewish Renaissance between the 19th and 20th centuries to describe the breaking through of new times, with a very clear messianic component. See, in this regard, Buber's writings of the 1900s and 1910s, especially the first three *Reden über das Judentum* (Talks on Judaism). See Buber 2007, 219-56, It. trans. by Lavagetto, Buber 2013, 110-53. The time near the end, which draws shorter or contracts in the Pauline passage 1Cor 7,29 (ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος) transforming and blurring the categories of the mundane, is sometimes rendered with the concept of 'turning point' ("time experienced a turning point"), where the messianic moment and the categorical inversion become even more evident. Another term used by the Messianic lexicon to express the breaking through of the new, the radical change and the 'rotating' and inversive dynamic is *Wende* 'turning point', which occurs for example in Rosenzweig, in an essay from 1929 that accompanies and illustrates the translation of the Bible, indicating the approximation to the eternity of the Kingdom in the present ("Die Sehnsucht nach seiner Ewigkeit vergeht dem Menschen, der Gottes Gegenwärtig werden in dieser Weltzeit erfährt und erhofft. Selbst das Wort der Bibel, das gewöhnlich mit Ewigkeit übersetzt wird, bedeutet in Wahrheit ja eben diese unsere Weltzeit bis zu ihrer Wende, bis zu 'jenem Tag'"). "The longing for God's eternity is lost on the person who experiences and hopes for God's presence in this world time. Even the Biblical word that is usually translated 'eternity' truly means our world time until its *turning point*, until 'that day'", Author's transl., Rosenzweig 1984b, 50; italics added). Heidegger himself, in *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, had used the same terms in a 'conversive' sense: "Der Ausgangspunkt des Wegs zur Philosophie ist die faktische Lebenserfahrung. Aber es scheint, als ob die Philosophie aus der faktischen Lebenserfahrung wieder herausführt. In der Tat führt jener Weg gewissermaßen nur vor die Philosophie, nicht bis zu ihr hin. Die Philoso-

ence of opposites,³⁸ the palingenetic moment, the stump-sprout isotopy – have always been part of the messianic dynamic.

4 Language Reversal and Silence

As an inherent necessity and theoretical outcome of translation, Benjamin therefore describes an unusual language which, through the authentic interlingual connection, subverts order and syntax, succeeding in affirming itself on the margins of silence and thus extinguishing the word. In light of this, the most faithful translation is the one that upsets meaning, brushing against pure language and expediting redemption, leading however, "geradenwegs ins Unverständliche" (Benjamin 1972, 17)³⁹ and to its own annihilation. Therefore, translation would represent – by semantic extension – the messianic language reversal,⁴⁰ a sudden and unexpected upheaval of syntactic and semantic categories. Redemption entails the extinction of meaning,⁴¹ which is both a necessity and a risk. In Benjamin's idea of language, in which Adorno sees an 'anticommunicative moment', which 'knows no restraints' (Adorno 1990, 46), the conjunctive idea that underlies translation is developed to the extent that it uncouples any logical links and reaches the edges of the realm of silence or even trespasses them.

Benjamin's discourse thus goes through a *Spannung*, in constant approximation to that *Entspannung*, the dissolution of the tension

phie selbst ist nur durch eine Umwendung jenes Weges zu erreichen; aber nicht durch eine einfache *Umwendung*, so daß das Erkennen dadurch lediglich auf andere Gegenstände gerichtet würde; sondern, radikaler, durch eine *eigentliche Umwandlung*" (Heidegger 1995, 10; italics added); "The starting point of the path to philosophy is the factual experience of life. But it seems as if philosophy leads out of the factual experience of life again. In fact, that path only leads, as it were, in front of philosophy, not all the way to it. Philosophy itself can only be reached through a reversal (*Umwendung*), but not through a simple turning which would orient cognition merely toward different objects but, more radically, through an authentic transformation/conversion (*Umwandlung*)", Author's transl. On Benjamin's messianic inversion, see Rose 2014, 278-91. See also Dubbels 2011, 133-41 and Khatib 2013.

38 Isaiah 11, 6-8: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them | and the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox | and the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den".

39 "Directly to incomprehensibility" (Benjamin 1996b, 260).

40 This idea is also expressed in Rose 2014.

41 By going back to the verb *erlöschen* ('to extinguish', 'to put out'), used by Benjamin in *Die Aufgabe* to describe the language of translation, we could therefore claim that, in this messianic articulation carried out linguistically, the *Erlösung* ('redemption') implies an *Erlöschung* ('demise', 'extinction').

that is inherent to the redemptive moment.

The language that Benjamin envisages as the result of translation can therefore be a salvific albeit insidious gift since, in order to anticipate redemption, it must become harsh, almost impassable, indistinguishable and incomprehensible. According to Benjamin, this path that leads to language nonsense can be exemplified by Hölderlin's late translations – a shining example of harmony of the harsh, where language is farthest from meaning and closest to music, "wie eine Äolsharfe vom Winde [...] berührt" (Benjamin 1972, 21)⁴² – and particularly Sophocles', "monströse Beispiele solcher Wörtlichkeit" (Benjamin 1972, 17),⁴³ where meaning evanesces as literalism emerges. But in the relinquishment of meaning there is a further implication: "Die Sophokles-Übersetzungen", Benjamin continues

waren Hölderlins letztes Werk. In ihnen stürzt der Sinn von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht in bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren. (Benjamin 1972, 17)⁴⁴

As pure literalism and encroachment, devoid of communication and devoid of meaning, translation inevitably proceeds towards total unintelligibility. Towards its shutdown and its own annihilation. As it travels through these spaces, it runs

Die ungeheure und ursprüngliche Gefahr aller Übersetzung: daß die Tore einer so erweiterten Sprache zufallen und den Übersetzer ins Schweigen schließen. (Benjamin 1972, 17)⁴⁵

Language in Benjamin would therefore be the happy and luminous redemptive utopia of being set free from the burden of meaning, of being emancipated from instrumental communication or – to echo his words – from the "bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache" (Benjamin 1977, 414).⁴⁶ Were it not an extremely fragile condition, always teetering on the brink of cracks and alterations: the withdrawal of language, the retraction of language within itself,⁴⁷ the retroversion

⁴² "The way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind" (Benjamin 1996b, 262).

⁴³ "Monstrous examples of such literalness" (Benjamin 1996b, 260).

⁴⁴ "Holderlin's translations from Sophocles were his last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language" (Benjamin 1996b, 262).

⁴⁵ "The enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator in silence" (Benjamin 1996b, 262).

⁴⁶ "The bourgeois conception of language" (Benjamin 1996, 65).

⁴⁷ In the aforementioned fragment *Zum Thema Einzelwissenschaft und Philosophie*, Benjamin – tracing an alternative route to bourgeois communication, governed by a

and contraction of the language until it becomes totally extinct – almost a renewed *tsimtsum* of speech – show, beyond the light of a new utterance, a dark implication, an unexpected fold, where the danger of silence, of the demise of words – which have now become useless and refractory – looms ahead. The *qabbalah* is well aware of this, which, as we have said, addresses the problem of language in all its facets, and which, in the words of George Steiner in *After Babel*, "knows of a day of redemption on which translation will no longer be necessary" (Steiner 1975, 499). However, the same *qabbalah* also envisages a more hidden and esoteric possibility, suggesting the hypothesis of a rebellion of language against man, who loses his grip on it and slips into silence and aphasia or follows the path, both delusional and charismatic, of confused and disjointed speech across the wide spectrum stretching from polyllalia and xenoglossia to glossolalia and glossopoiesis,⁴⁸ but devoid of any Pentecostal bliss and without even contemplating the consolation of mystical silence derived from the perfect union with the divine and from the contemplation of transcendence. The abrupt demise of language will decree the end of any possibility of understanding, making translation impossible, even inconceivable. Free from the bondage of meaning – these were, after all, the ongoing tension and the messianic glimmer of the Benjaminian model of language and translation – words will be both wonderful and inert, wrapped up in themselves, "they will 'become only themselves, and as dead stones in our mouths'" (Steiner 1975, 499). A grave danger for those who, like Benjamin, understand language and translation in such an extreme way, but, as Hölderlin writes at the beginning of his late poem *Patmos*⁴⁹ – outlining, by means of a fading language, always on the verge of becoming extinct, a hermeneutics of history with a vanishing point, far from reconciled and harmonious, on a redemption *e negativo* – "wo [...] Gefahr ist, wächst | das Rettende auch" (Hölderlin 1970, 340).⁵⁰

principle of syntactic causality, and postulating, in its place, a retreat of logical discursiveness – speaks of "ein[...] bestimmte[s] [...] Insichgehen der Sache selbst" (Benjamin 1985, 51); "a certain going into itself of the thing", Author's transl.

48 On glossolalia, see Lipparini 2012.

49 Particularly in his later years, Hölderlin, master of the *harte Fügung* (harsh construct), stands at the head of that poetic line where discursiveness withdraws, where language becomes spare and at times inextricable, proceeding through hyperbatons, leaping and eliding connections, with a rhapsodic and syncopated alternation between flashes of inspiration and lyrical illuminations, fragments and poetic torsos, statements of a gnomic, sententious or paradoxical nature, as the metric structures explode and break into splinters, fragments and atoms of meaning. A line which, if it were to be chased to its outermost limits, leads straight to Paul Celan, who clearly has a close kinship with Hölderlin and Benjamin.

50 "But where danger is, there grows | as well that which saves", Author's transl.

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Translation as a Test for the Explicit-Implicit Distinction

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Abstract The paper will first present Kripke's "translation test" to identify any semantic ambiguity and his claim, against Donnellan, that we should not expect to disambiguate the referential vs. attributive uses of definite descriptions via translation into another language. Second, the paper will discuss a strengthened version of Kripke's "translation test" proposed by Voltolini to distinguish between any semantic vs. pragmatic phenomena. Finally, the paper will show that translation cannot work as a test for the semantic/pragmatic distinction, but can rather work as a test for the explicit/implicit distinction.

Keywords Ambiguity. Definite Descriptions. Explicatures. Implicatures. Kripke. Lexical Pragmatics. Translation

Summary Acknowledgements. – 1 Introduction. – 2 Kripke on Definite Descriptions and Translation. – 3 Alternative Translations and the Translator's Dilemma. – 4 Translation, Interpretive Possibilities, and the Explicit/implicit Divide. – 5 Conclusion.



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Introduction

Translation has been used as a test to identify lexically ambiguous words (Zwicky, Sadock 1975; Hirst 1987): the failure of one-to-one translatability would prove the existence of a genuine ambiguity in the meaning encoded in the original sentence. Saul Kripke (1979) extended the test to identify any “semantic or (syntactic) ambiguity”. Following Paul Grice (1975), he distinguished between what words mean and what the speaker meant, by using those words in a given context. For instance, the sentence “Where is the bank?” may have different meanings in different contexts, but this is a matter of difference in words’ meaning, not in the speaker’s meaning. We might find it to be differently translated into another language. It is not the same case for a sentence with a definite description as in: “The murderer of Smith is insane”, where the referential vs. attributive use is different in terms of the speaker’s meaning. We should not expect to translate it into other languages. In the second section of the paper, I will present Kripke’s “translation test” and discuss some implications for translation, with particular attention to the translation of definite descriptions.

In the third section of the paper, I will present an extension of Kripke’s “translation test” proposed by Alberto Voltolini (2009), who strengthened Kripke’s test, arguing that a linguistic phenomenon in the original text is genuinely semantic if it can be solved through translation, forcing the translator to choose between two different senses in the words of another language. A linguistic phenomenon would be instead genuinely pragmatic if it can be preserved in translation. In the fourth section of the paper, I will argue that translation does not work as a test to distinguish between semantic and pragmatic phenomena, but it can instead work as a test for the distinction between explicit and implicit phenomena of meaning. In the paper, I will consider semantic phenomena those linguistic phenomena whose meaning is provided by the conventional meaning of the words and the compositional rules of meaning, while I will consider pragmatic phenomena those linguistic phenomena whose meaning depends needs contextual and inferential processes to be determined. I will consider implicit phenomena of meaning those linguistic phenomena whose meaning are completely recovered by inferential processes (completely new propositions), while I will consider explicit phenomena those linguistic phenomena whose meaning is largely

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underdetermined by the linguistically encoded meaning of the words and thus need to be completed by contextual information (Recanati 2004, 2010; Carston 2002). I will argue that the difference between the original and the alternative translations is the result of a change in the degree of explicitness in translation. I will go back to the problem of translation of definite descriptions and, in the last section, I will draw some conclusions on translation in general as a test to distinguish explicit-implicit meaning.

1 Kripke on Definite Descriptions and Translation

In a famous paper, *Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference* (1979), Kripke discussed definite descriptions, i.e., the use of the definite article, "the", to refer to a specific individual, as in the well-known example "The murderer of Smith". In particular, Kripke focused on Keith Donnellan's distinction between the attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions (Donnellan 1966). In Donnellan's words:

A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion, states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing. (Donnellan 1966, 285)

For instance, when using the definite description "The murderer of Smith" in the sentence "The murderer of Smith is insane", the utterer uses the definite description attributively when she is talking about the brutal killing committed by whoever was the murderer, while she uses the definite description referentially if she refers to a specific person, as for instance Jones. In the latter case, the proper name could actually replace the definite description, but not in the case of the attributive use of the definite description, where the speaker may not be able to identify the referent. In Donnellan's view, the distinction between the attributive and referential use of definite description is pragmatic, rather than semantic; it is "*a function of the speaker's intentions* in a particular case" (Donnellan 1996, 297). Indeed, he further stated that there is no semantic ambiguity in the meaning of words between the referential and the attributive readings of definite descriptions, but possibly a pragmatic ambiguity:

"The murderer of Smith" may be used either way in the sentence "The murderer of Smith is insane". It does not appear plausible to account for this, either, as an ambiguity in the sentence. The grammatical structure of the sentence seems to me to be the same whether the description is used referentially or attributively: that is, it is not syntactically ambiguous. Nor does it seem at all attractive to suppose an ambiguity in the meaning of the words; it does not appear to be semantically ambiguous. (Perhaps we could say that the sentence is pragmatically ambiguous: the distinction between roles that the description plays is a function of the speaker's intentions.) These, of course, are intuitions; I do not have an argument for these conclusions. Nevertheless, the burden of proof is surely on the other side. (Donnellan 1966, 297)

Kripke took the burden of proof and argued that there is no reason to suppose a pragmatic ambiguity, as it is "not 'uses', in some pragmatic sense, but *senses* of a sentence which can be analyzed" (Kripke 1978, 13). Following Grice (1975), Kripke distinguished between what the speaker's words meant on a particular occasion and what the speaker meant by using those words on a particular occasion. Consider, for instance, the following sentence:

- (1) She asked me where the *bank* is.

Sentence (1) may mean different things in different contexts (something that has to do with a certain financial institution or a riverside), but this is a matter of difference in word meaning, not in the speaker's meaning. We should not expect to find the same semantic ambiguity in another language, as there are historical, conventional and/or purely accidental reasons if two different senses are expressed with the same word. For instance, there are different words in German or in French for the different senses of the English word "know". Indeed, "there is no reason for the ambiguity to be preserved in languages unrelated to our own" (Kripke 1978, 19), and to find a one-to-one equivalence in translation into different languages (Ervas 2008).

While what the words mean is given by convention in a language, what the speaker meant is given by the speaker's intentions and relevant contextual features. In sentence (2):

- (2) *The murderer of Smith* is insane.

the difference between the referential and the attributive use of the definite description is in terms of the speaker's meaning, not in word meaning. Kripke argued that we should not expect to find another language having different words for different *uses* of a sentence, as in the case of the referential vs. attributive uses of definite description:

if the sentence is not (syntactically or) semantically ambiguous, it has only *one* analysis; to say that it has two distinct analyses is to attribute a syntactic or semantic ambiguity to it. (Kripke 1978, 13)

Intuitively, we should not expect to find a D-language, i.e., a “Donellan’s unambiguous language”, having two different words, for instance “the” and “ze”, for the attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions. This is because we can provide a unitary account or interpretation of definite descriptions in terms of the speaker’s meaning, and not different senses that can be disambiguated in another language. Postulating a pragmatic ambiguity unless we are forced to do so, in Kripke’s view, would amount to embracing “the lazy man’s approach” in philosophy. Just as Grice warned philosophers to hone the “Modified Occam’s Razor”, according to which senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity, Kripke invites philosophers to avoid positing ambiguities in sentences where a unitary account in terms of uses of those sentences could be provided. An alternative explanation is provided by Kripke for a unitary account of attributive/referential uses of definite descriptions: in the referential use of definite descriptions, the *semantic referent* is given by the speaker’s *general* intention to refer to a certain object (the “simple” case); in the attributive use of definite descriptions, the *speaker’s referent* is given by the speaker’s *specific* intention to refer to the object in a certain occasion (the “complex” case). In certain occasions, the “simple” and the “complex” cases might coincide: for instance, the specific intention might simply be the intention to refer to the semantic referent.

Kripke proposed also an empirical “translation test” to assess whether a genuine semantic ambiguity has been found in the original sentence:

We can ask empirically whether languages are in fact found that contain distinct words expressing the allegedly distinct senses. If no such language is found, once again this is evidence that a unitary account of the word or phrase in question should be sought. (Kripke 1979, 19)

Kripke himself provided the example of the word “bank”, which can be disambiguated via translation into other languages, as for instance into Italian: “banca” (financial institution) and “riva” (river-side). However, the “translation test” failed to identify cases of lexically ambiguous or homonymous words, having distinct but unrelated senses (Zwicky, Sadock 1975; Hirst 1987). Indeed, as already pointed out (Ervas 2014), also polysemous words, having distinct but related senses, can be disambiguated via translation into other languages, as in the following examples (in italics):

- (3) Mi piace il *pesce*.
a. Me gusta el pez.
b. Me gusta el pescado.
- (4) Era il *nipote* di Lussu.
a. C'était le neveu de Lussu.
b. C'était le petit-fils de Lussu.
- (5) La *pata* del perro estaba herida.
a. La gamba del cane era ferita.
b. La zampa del cane era ferita

However, Kripke himself warned to be cautious in using the “translation test”, as it needs further exploration and refinement:

The mere fact that some language subdivides the extension of an English word into several subclasses, with their own separate words, and has no word for the whole extension, does not show that the English word was ambiguous (think of the story that the Eskimos have different words for different kinds of snow). If many unrelated languages preserve a single word, this in itself is evidence for a unitary concept. On the other hand, a word may have different senses that are obviously related. One sense may be metaphorical for another (though in that case, it may not really be a separate sense, but simply a common metaphor.) “Statistics” can mean both statistical data and the science of evaluating such data. And the like. (Kripke 1978, 26 fn. 29)

As we shall see in the next section, the “translation test” has been further strengthened as a test to distinguish all semantic phenomena in the original sentence from pragmatic ones (Voltolini 2009). However, in the case of the referential-attributive uses of definite descriptions, Kripke maintained that any attempt to provide a pragmatic account of the referential vs. attributive readings would have been so close to the Gricean explanation he provided “as to render any assumptions of distinct senses implausible and superfluous” (Kripke 1978, 26 fn. 29). A Gricean account of pragmatic phenomena has been maintained also in the strengthened version of the “translation test” (Voltolini 2009). However, as we shall see in the third section, other languages can be found where the referential and the attributive uses of definite description can be encoded in different words translating the article “the”. As I shall argue, other pragmatic accounts can be provided to explain these cases.

2 Alternative Translations and the Translator's Dilemma

The aim of the “translation test” was to discover alternative translations into another language, distinguishing the senses of an original (English) sentence, and thus to empirically show a genuine semantic (or syntactic) ambiguity in the original sentence. Against Donnellan, Kripke followed Grice, claiming that we should not expect to find in different languages two alternative translations disambiguating the referential vs. attributive uses of definite descriptions. In a more recent paper, *L'irrimediabile dilemma del traduttore* (2009), Voltolini proposed a strengthened version of the Kripkean “translation test”, by claiming that translation can work as a test to identify *any* genuinely semantic phenomenon in the original sentence:

Any phenomenon of signification indifferent to translation is pragmatic, while any phenomenon of signification that not only is pointed out by a difference in translation as Kripke argues, but even forces a choice between a translation that preserves it and one which does not preserve it, is semantic. Translation assumes therefore the value of test or identification criterion of a phenomenon of signification as a genuine semantic phenomenon. (Voltolini 2009, 45)

Following Kripke, Voltolini claimed that translation works as a test to show that a linguistic phenomenon in the original text is genuinely *semantic* when it can have two (or more) separate analyses, which could be expressed by two or more different senses in the words of another language. Thus, if a translation places the translator in front of a dilemma, forcing her to choose between two alternative translations of the same original sentence, this means that the translator (or whoever reads the alternatives) identified a genuine semantic phenomenon in the original sentence. Generalizing Kripke's methodological remarks, translation can thus work as a test to distinguish semantic from pragmatic phenomena, because it can highlight two (or more) different *senses* expressed by different words in the target language.

For instance, *reference assignment* forces the translator to choose between alternative translations of a sentence in a situation similar to that arising in lexical disambiguation. Consider the possible alternative translations of sentence (6) into Hopi language (Katz 1978, 222):

- (6) He thinks that he wins
a. Pam navoti:ta (pam) mo:titani-gate
b. Pam navoti:ta (pam) mo:titani-q

While translation a) expresses a co-reference, translation b) does not maintain the co-reference, because the referent of the subject of the translation of the verb “thinks” is not the same referent of the subject of the translation of the verb “wins”. Hopi language has indeed the appropriate linguistic resources to solve the (co)reference assignment. Voltolini (2009) provided a lot of examples to show how the translator might be forced to choose between alternative translations that preserve part of the meaning of the sentence while losing another part of the meaning of the sentence. For instance, it is quite common for the translator to choose between a translation that preserves the linguistic meaning but loses the word pun and a translation that preserves the word pun but waives the linguistic meaning. In Voltolini’s example (2009, 35), the translation of the German sentence (7) into Italian might force the translation to choose among the following alternatives:

- (7) Weiche, Wotan, Weiche! (R. Wagner, Rheingold)
(i) Vattene, Wotan, vattene!
(ii) Alla coque, Wotan, alla coque!
(iii) Marcia, Wotan, marcia!

Translations (i) and (ii) maintain the linguistic meaning, disambiguating two possible senses in Italian (“vattene” and “alla coque”), but losing the pun word of the original sentence in German; translation (iii) preserves the pun word, as “marcia” in Italian means both the imperative verb “walk” and the female adjective “rotten”, but losing the linguistic meaning of the German word “Weiche”.

Interestingly, as Voltolini (2009, 41-4) argued, loss in translation is not just something accidentally due to the linguistic differences among languages, but rather something *necessary* in translation. In the case of the passage from *oratio obliqua* (8) to *oratio recta* (9), as he pointed out, the translator cannot maintain both the reference to the original sentence and its truth value (T = true; F = false). For instance, in the following example:

- (8) Andrea dice che la birra Ichnusa, come Socrate, ti fa dire ciò che vuole.
(i) Andrea says that Ichnusa beer, like Socrates, makes you say what it wants.
(ii) Andrea dit que la bière Ichnusa, comme Socrate, te fait dire ce qu’elle veut.
- (9) Andrea dice: “La birra Ichnusa, come Socrate, ti fa dire ciò che vuole”
(i) Andrea says: “Ichnusa beer, like Socrates, makes you say what it wants” (F)
(ii) Andrea says: “La birra Ichnusa, come Socrate, ti fa dire ciò che vuole” (T)
(i) Andrea dit: “La bière Ichnusa, comme Socrate, te fait dire ce qu’il veut” (F)
(ii) Andrea dit: “La birra Ichnusa, come Socrate, ti fa dire ciò che vuole” (T)

However, as Voltolini noted (2009, 42), the problem is not limited to cases of use-mention distinction. For instance, Tyler Burge, in *Self-reference and Translation* (1978), clearly demonstrates that the translator can never keep the reference, self-reference and linguistic meaning together. In the example of translation into German provided by Burge (1978, 138-9), the choice of the translator of one of the different parts of meaning (reference, self-reference, and linguistic meaning) is indeed necessary, not contingent:

- (10) This sentence begins with a four-letter demonstrative.
(i) Jener Satz fängt mit einem hinweisenden Artikel mit vier Buchstaben an.
(ii) Dieser Satz fängt mit einem hinweisenden Artikel mit sechs Buchstaben an.
(iii) Dieser Satz fängt mit einem hinweisenden Artikel mit vier Buchstaben an.

The translator's choice among these alternatives would probably rely on extralinguistic contextual factors. Burge concluded that a good translation should be

responsible for preserving certain *global* characteristics of discourse, as well as more *local* features. One cannot always read off the best translation of a sentence (at an occurrence) simply by understanding the sentence itself. (Burge 1978, 142; italics added)

However, even though it is a matter of principle that in a translation we cannot preserve all aspects of signification, Voltolini's conclusions are not so dramatic:

One can try to argue that if problems of translation arise (and often cannot fail to arise) with respect to an original, in which it is necessary to choose among different factors that contribute to the general signification of the original, which ones to preserve in the translation, then the nuances of meaning indicated by these factors are genuine semantic nuances, not nuances postulated by a theory or some pre-theoretical intuition. Or, conversely, if such nuances are not genuine semantic nuances, then there is no problem of choosing among such nuances in the translation. (Voltolini 2009, 44)

In the latest case, the phenomena in the original will be pragmatic, as they are "indifferent" to translation. Voltolini himself (2009, 38) provided an example of irony (11), that can be preserved in translation:

- (11) *Ecco il re di Sardegna!*
Here comes the king of Sardinia!
Voilà le roi de Sardaigne!
Hier ist der König von Sardinien!

In Kripke's terms, this might be a case of speaker's reference, rather than semantic reference, depending on the speaker's intentions (cf. Kripke 1978, 24 fn. 22). There are other examples of pragmatic phenomena that can be preserved in translation, as for instance in the case of generalized (12) and particularized (13) conversational implicatures (Grice 1975, 51):

(12) Michael made dinner *and* took a shower.

Michele preparò la cena e fece la doccia.

Michel a préparé le dîner *et* a pris une douche.

(13) A: Smith doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days.

B: He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.

A: Smith non sembra avere una ragazza in questi giorni.

B: Ultimamente ha fatto molte visite a New York.

A: Smith ne semble pas avoir de petite amie ces jours-ci.

B: Il a effectué de nombreuses visites à New York ces derniers temps.

In the first case, the temporal reading of the sentence, i.e., the implication of time sequence, that is conveyed by using "and" in a list of events, is maintained by the translation of "and" into "e" in Italian and "et" in French. In the second case, the implicature that Smith does have a girlfriend is maintained in the translation into Italian and French, if the conversational context is maintained.

However, as already pointed out (Ervas 2014), also the strengthened version of the "translation test" does not seem to work for the distinction between semantic and pragmatic phenomena. Sentences like (14) might arise no problem in translation, but this would not mean that a pragmatic phenomenon was identified.

(14) The cat is white.

Il gatto è bianco.

Le chat est blanc.

One might argue that the test works only when the translator is forced to choose between two (or more) alternative translations. However, problems in translation seem to arise also when a "cross-border" linguistic phenomenon (Ervas 2014, 94), as in the cases of metaphor (15) and metonymy (16), or a pragmatic phenomenon appears in the original sentence, as in the case of idiomatic sentences (17):

(15) Un abbozzo di sorriso attraversa il suo volto.

(i) A hint of a smile crosses her face. // Un toque de una sonrisa cruza por su cara.

(ii) A ghost of a smile crosses her face. // Una sombra de una sonrisa cruza por su cara.

- (16) Giada has given a Hoover.
(i) Giada ha regalato un Folletto. // Giada ha regalado una Roomba.
(ii) Giada ha regalato un aspirapolvere. // Giada ha regalado una aspiradora.
- (17) It's raining cats and dogs.
(i) Sta piovendo a catinelle. // Está lloviendo a cántaros.
(ii) Sta piovendo molto. // Está lloviendo mucho.

In the translation of sentence (15), the translator cannot maintain at the same time the literal meaning of the metaphor and its figurative meaning: she should find out a translation of the figurative meaning (i) or a pragmatic equivalent (ii) in the target language. In the translation of sentence (16), the translator is forced to choose between a translation that maintains the metonymy in the target language (via another famous brand in the target culture) (i) or the figurative meaning of the original sentence (ii). In the translation of sentence (17), the translator needs to choose between a pragmatic equivalent in the target language (i) (Ervas 2008), and the idiomatic meaning of the original sentence (ii). However, one might still argue that most cases of metaphor and metonymy are semantic phenomena: indeed, both metaphor in (15) and metonymy in (16) have a highly conventional meaning in the respective linguistic communities. One might also argue that, after all, as Kripke suggested, when choosing a pragmatic equivalent of an idiomatic sentence in the target language, the translator is maintaining a unitary account of the pragmatic phenomenon, as the meaning of an idiomatic sentence cannot be provided by the meanings of its words and compositional rules for the meanings.

3 Translation, Interpretive Possibilities, and the Explicit/implicit Divide

However, the “translation test” does not work for the semantic/pragmatic distinction, because problems in translation seem to arise also in the case of implicatures. Consider the following example of conversational particularized implicature:

- (18) A: Dario è superstizioso?
B: Non esce mai di casa il venerdì 17...
A: Is Dario superstitious? // ¿Dario es supersticioso?
B: He never leaves home on Friday 13th...// Nunca el sale de casa el martes 13...
B: He never leaves home on Friday 17th...// Nunca el sale de casa el viernes 17...

implicating that Dario is superstitious. In order to maintain the implicature, the translator should find out a pragmatic equivalent of “venerdì 17” in the target language, i.e., the pragmatic equivalent that works as “the unlucky day” in the target cultural context (ex. “Friday 13th” in English, “martes 13” in Spanish). If the translator chooses to preserve the linguistic meaning, translating “venerdì 17” into English with “Friday 17th” or into Spanish with “viernes 17”, she will lose the implicature in the target cultural context. Two alternative translations into another language can be offered to the translator: the expression translating “venerdì 17” in the target language needs indeed to be enriched as “the unlucky day” to guarantee the same implicature in the target language, otherwise the linguistic meaning is preserved but the implicature is lost.

In this case, the translation needs to resort to pragmatic processes of lexical modulation or enrichment (Carston 2002; Recanati 2004, 2010) that “intrude” into the semantic realm to arrive at the proposition expressed and make it explicit in the target language to guarantee the implicature. This process involves the completion of the logical form (i.e., the semantic representation encoded by the utterance) to arrive at the communicated proposition. Indeed, following Robyn Carston’s semantic underdeterminacy view,

the logical form of a linguistic expression seldom, if ever, determines a truth condition, so that pragmatics is inevitably required in the recovery of a fully propositional representation. (Carston 2002, 184)

Thus, Carston proposed two different pragmatic realms: the realm of *explicatures* or explicit meaning, and the realm of *implicatures* or implicit meaning (see also Carston, Hall 2012 for the explicature/implicature distinction). While the conceptual content of an implicature is totally supplied by pragmatic inference, the explicature is the pragmatic development of a logical form linguistically encoded by an utterance via two sources: the linguistic expressions used and the context. In Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s definitions, both explicatures and implicatures are assumptions communicated, but the distinction between what is explicit and what is implicit is that:

- (I) An assumption communicated by an utterance U is *explicit* [hence an “explicature”] if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by U. [Note: in cases of ambiguity, a surface form encodes more than one logical form, hence the use of the indefinite here, “a logical form encoded by U”.]
- (II) An assumption communicated by U which is not explicit is *implicit* [hence an “implicature”]. (Sperber, Wilson 1986, 182; italics added)

Though distinct, explicatures and implicatures are interrelated: indeed, “the implicatures of an utterance must be deducible from its explicatures” (Wilson, Carston 2007, 242), based on appropriate contextual assumptions. As in the example (18), the translator needs to recover the explicit meaning of “venerdì 17”, alias “the unlucky day”, as assumed in the Italian cultural context, to grasp the implicature that Dario is superstitious. We can find alternative translations in modulating the meaning of “venerdì 17” (“Friday 13th/martes 13”), based on contextual assumptions, to find the right balance to preserve the implicature in the target text. The translator might still decide to make the implicature that Dario is superstitious explicit in the target text or add it in a footnote, but this would be a completely new proposition coming from a global pragmatic process rather than a local enrichment of the already existing logical form. Indeed, with the explicature being a development of the linguistically encoded logical form of the sentence, the mutual adjustment process between explicatures and implicatures precludes entire extra propositions from being incorporated into the proposition expressed. As pointed out,

since such enrichments, which have global effects, are excluded, it follows that free enrichment is essentially local: it applies to subpropositional constituents, either replacing encoded concepts with inferred concepts, or adding material (unarticulated constituents) to change the interpretation of some encoded element (making it more specific, or broadening its denotation, [...] and so on). (Hall 2008, 445)

All these local processes of enrichment are necessary to warrant the implicature of the source sentence in the target language.

From this theoretical perspective, the development of the linguistically encoded logical form is not limited to disambiguation, but rather included a variety of pragmatic processes (e.g., saturation, enrichment, and transfer) operating in the very constitution of the explicit level of meaning. In particular, in their unitary account of lexical pragmatics, Carston and Wilson (2007) highlighted two pragmatic processes of broadening and narrowing that take the linguistically encoded concept in the utterance words and modulate them in an “ad hoc concept” in the interpretive process. For instance, when uttering the sentence (19):

(19) John never drinks when he drives.

the concept encoded in the word “drink” is pragmatically narrowed down to a part of the concept encoded in the word “drink”, i.e., the ad hoc concept “drink alcohol” to convey the appropriate communicated proposition in that context. Instead, when uttering the sentence (20),

(20) The ATM swallowed my credit card.

the concept encoded in the word “swallow” is modulated via a broadening process into the ad hoc concept of “rapidly withdrew without returning”. In the same vein, also metaphors like (21):

(21) Giacomo is a bulldozer.

can be interpreted as the result of a pragmatic enrichment which takes as an input the concept BULLDOZER and gives as an output the ad hoc concept BULLDOZER* having as relevant properties attributed to Giacomo the properties of being “cynical”, “insensitive”, etc. In their lexical pragmatics, indeed, modulation via narrowing and broadening processes (or a combination of the two) is the outcome of a “single interpretive process which fine-tunes the interpretation of almost every word” (Wilson, Carston 2007, 231).

In François Recanati’s view (1993, 286-7), all these pragmatic processes can generate “pragmatic ambiguity”, i.e., “a form of “ambiguity” which affects truth-conditions even though it is pragmatic (in the sense of contextual) rather than semantic”. Indeed, in Recanati’s view, pragmatics is not confined to the speaker’s meaning we can grasp via inferential processes, as contextual elements can also modulate the meaning of the words composing an utterance, thus affecting the evaluation of its truth-conditions. Translation can offer alternative analyses of the original sentences in both the case of semantic ambiguity and the case of pragmatic ambiguity due to pragmatic processes that would carry out the proposition expressed. As represented below [tab. 1], the translator might expect to be obliged to choose between alternative translations when local and mandatory pragmatic processes are required to derive the communicated assumptions, but not when global and optional processes of pragmatic inference are required to understand the communicated content.

Table 1 Translation as a test for the explicit/implicit divide

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is linguistically encoded• What is said<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explicit meaning• Explicature	}	Alternative translations (local and mandatory processes)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is implied<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Implicit meaning• Implicature	}	A completely new proposition in translation (global and optional processes)

From this perspective, translation would point out not only a case of semantic ambiguity in the disambiguation process (as in the case of homonymy, when a word has two or more unrelated senses possibly disambiguated in another language), but also cases of *sense-generality* (when a word included two or more related senses possibly explicitly expressed by another language). In the latest case, two (or more) different interpretive possibilities are highlighted in the process of translation (Van der Sandt 1988; Atlas 1989). Indeed, as Jay Atlas noted (1989, 31), “the sense-generality of a sentence radically underdetermines [...] the truth-conditional content of its utterances”, thus we need to resort to pragmatically inferred aspects of truth-conditional content.

Translation might then work as a test to distinguish two different faces of communicated content in the pragmatic realm: the explicit and the implicit ones. Thus, the translator might be forced to choose among *different interpretive possibilities* when enriching the logical form of the sentence to be translated into another language, while she might preserve the implicatures as they are fully derived as new propositions. Indeed, as already pointed out in previous work on translation:

What is crucial to translation as regards enrichment is that languages differ in the strategies used to make meaning explicit. Thus, one language may be equipped to encode very subtle nuances by means of specific linguistic devices, whilst another language may commonly express the equivalent nuances by linguistic devices which encode very vague semantic constraints on the interpretation. This forces translators to resort to pragmatic enrichment of the logical form in order to derive the intended propositional form of the source sentence. (Ervas 2014, 97)

For instance, there might be languages encoding what Donnellan intuitively called “pragmatic ambiguity” between the referential vs. attributive readings of definite descriptions. Pace Kripke, languages that can encode differences in the referential vs. attributive use of definite descriptions were actually found in Northern Frisian (Ebert 1970), Malagasy (Keenan, Ebert 1973), and Greek (Guardiano 2012; Longobardi 2005). Talmy Givón (1978, 251-2) provided some examples of languages encoding different “degrees of definiteness” in different articles (“di”, “a”) translating the article “the”:

- (22) John was surprised that the man who won was drunk.
(i) John wonert ham dat *di* maan wat woon bisööben wiar.
(ii) John wonert ham dat *a* maan wat woon bisööben wiar.

While the article “di” maintains the ambiguity between the referential and the attributive interpretation of the definite description, the article “a” has the attributive reading. Furthermore, Givón provided the following example in Malagasy:

- (23) Rakoto was surprised that *the* winner was drunk.
(i) Gaga Rakoto fa mamo *ny* mpandresy.
(ii) Gaga Rakoto fa mamo *ilay* mpandresy.

In translation (i) the article “ny” is ambiguous and allows both the referential and the attributive readings, while in translation (ii) the article “ilay” allows just the referential reading. Furthermore, other languages have been found where the referential/attribution distinction is grammatically marked by the presence of the subjunctive mood (Farkas 1985). From this perspective, the use of definite descriptions can be best understood as a particular type of enrichment of the logical form encoded by the linguistic utterance (Rouchota 1992), based on the contextual interpretation of the definite description in the original sentence in either a referential or attributive way. These examples indeed show that languages are in fact found where different lexical resources can be used to enrich the meaning in translation, providing alternative interpretive possibilities that make meaning more explicit in the target language.

4 Conclusion

The paper introduced Kripke’s “translation test” (1978) for the identification of any semantic ambiguity and Voltolini’s strengthened version of the test (2009) to distinguish semantic vs. pragmatic phenomena, discussing their possible limitations but also the interesting linguistic phenomena the process of translation might bring to light. Finally, I proposed my own version of the “translation test”: if the process of translation offers us alternative interpretive readings possibly encoded in another language, then we resorted to pragmatic processes of selection (in the case of ambiguity) or completion of the logical form to make meaning explicit. In the latter case, the translator needs a variety of processes (saturation, enrichment, transfer) that operate at the level of what is said or at the level of explicit meaning to arrive at the communicated proposition. As languages differ in the strategies used to make meaning explicit, the translator is forced to resort to different pragmatic processes in order to translate the communicated content from one language into another (Carston 2002; Ervas 2014). Different from the case of explicatures, implicatures are completely new propositions, totally derived via pragmat-

ic inference from the speaker's utterance. In the interpretation process of the original sentence, we can draw information not only from the original sentence, but also from the context, to fill the gap between different degrees of meaning explicitness that languages permit (Rosales Sequeiros 2002). The target language might force the translator to explicitly encode a meaning which was only implicit in the semantic representation of the original text. Example (16) shows that this may be due to a choice of the translator not only on the basis of the linguistic meaning but also on some other grounds, for instance the *cultural context* and its differences from the original one.

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Interpretation as Translation A Gadamerian Perspective

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Abstract The phenomenon of translation plays an important role in Gadamer's hermeneutics as a model for what interpretation actually is and for what it accomplishes. This paper wants to show that, by characterising interpretation as a translation, the philosopher wishes to articulate how understanding is a mediation process that is linguistic in nature and that adapts itself to the situation to which the reader belongs. With regards to the philosophical inquiry about truth and method, the example of translation is particularly instructive because it illustrates how the interpretative reworking of a foreign meaning might be an legitim and integral part of its conveying, and not something like a subjective interference that ought to be avoided at all costs.

Keywords Gadamer. Hermeneutics. Translation. Interpretation. Philosophy.

Summary 1 Introduction: The Manifoldness of the Hermeneutical Task. – 2 Interpretation as Translation. – 2.1 A Productive Application. – 2.2 A Linguistic Mediation. – 2.3 A Practical Deliberation. – 3 Conclusion: Translation as Interpretation.



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1 Introduction: The Manifolddness of the Hermeneutical Task

In Gadamer's hermeneutics, the phenomenon of translation gains ontological relevance as a model for the way in which we, as finite historical individuals, make sense of the world in which we live. Since it is through an explanatory effort that is discursive in nature that we are able to make something alien our own,

the translation process fundamentally contains the whole secret of how human beings come to an understanding of the world and communicate with each other. (Gadamer 2004, 552)¹

By highlighting the "linguisticity" (*Sprachlichkeit*) of our relationship to reality, the philosopher wishes to bring to light the universal scope of the problem of interpretation.

The intertwining of comprehension, interpretation and translation is, however, not a modern philosophical invention. As indicated by Gadamer (1974, 1061 f.), the etymology of *hermeneuein* points to such a connection since this verb originally encompassed a variety of meanings such as declaring, explaining, translating, and interpreting (both in the sense of oral *dolmetschen* and of textual *auslegen*). The intricacy of the hermeneutical task is further exhibited by the figure of Hermes: the messenger of the Olympians was not only the carrier between the human and the divine world, but he was also an interpreter who had to explain to the mortals, in a language they could understand, the orders sent from the gods. Hermeneutics is consequently not only the art of understanding but also the art of making a foreign discourse intelligible by transposing its content into speech that can be understood by the other. Schleiermacher (1813; 1838), the founder of modern hermeneutics, suggested that the task of the interpreter differed in degree, but not in nature, from that of the translator: in both cases, there is an *interpretes* who *stands between* two distinct parties to ensure the proper conveyance of meaning between them. The German theologian, however, did not establish any significant difference between the interpretation of a text and of speech since he considered both as particular linguistic expressions of an author's inner thoughts.²

In this context, it was Gadamer's contribution to emphasise how the interpretation of a *text* presented a specific hermeneutical difficulty because, in it, language is detached from a variety of verbal and

¹ Hereafter abbreviated as TM for *Truth and Method*.

² In this view, we can recognise the influence of the romanticism of his epoch. See Forster 2010.

non-verbal elements, such as the author himself and his socio-cultural background, the immediate context of enunciation, the rhythm and tone of the voice, and the use of facial expressions and bodily gestures, that would contribute to the proper communication of meaning in the context of a living conversation. In a way, a spoken word already “interprets itself to an astonishing degree” (TM, 395), while the written word requires more effort on the part of the reader, who has to convert a sequence of dead signs into an eloquent discourse that speaks directly to their “inner ear”. It is because the deciphering of scripture transforms “something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity” (TM, 156) that Gadamer can affirm that “reading is like translating”.³

2 Interpretation as Translation

The fundamental task of hermeneutics is to make a text speak in such a way that its “subject matter” (or “*Sache*”, to use Gadamer’s phenomenological vocabulary), can be immediately understood by oneself and by the other. Translation, which deals with a discourse that is not only *written* but written in a *foreign language*, is consequently not only a model for the interpretation process but also an *extreme case* of it: it attempts to enable communication between two parties who do not live in the same linguistic world. According to Gadamer, such a situation can be especially instructive because it allows us to become aware of mechanisms at play in every understanding but that usually go unnoticed when the interpretative challenge is not as imposing. Essentially, translation should make it clear that the overcoming of the strangeness that obscures the understanding of a text requires a productive effort of *application*, *mediation* and *deliberation*. Furthermore, it should show that such an effort does not leave the “original content” completely unchanged, but that it is nonetheless at the service of the text itself:

the translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context in which the other speaker lives. This does not, of course, mean that he is at liberty to falsify the meaning of what the other person says. Rather, the meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world, it must establish its validity within it in a new way. (TM, 386)

With regard to the general question of *objectivity* in the human sciences and of the *validity* of hermeneutics, the example of translation

³ *Lesen ist wie Übersetzen* is the title of a text published in 1989.

is particularly enlightening because it embodies an interpretative enterprise that is unavoidably accomplished by a fallible subject who is situated in a particular linguistic horizon, but that is not arbitrary. Rather, it is regulated by the authoritative guidance of language to which both the text and the interpreter are subjected. In the following sections, we propose to clarify what Gadamer wishes to teach us about interpretation by characterising it as a translation.

2.1 A Productive Application

First of all, the phenomenon of translation is paradigmatic for hermeneutics because it not only draws attention to the tension between strangeness and familiarity at the centre of the hermeneutical experience, but also demonstrates how this tension can be resolved by transposing a foreign discourse in a linguistic horizon the reader is already familiar with. Indeed, an important thesis presented by Gadamer is that understanding always involves the *application* (*Anwendung*) of the content to be understood in the situation of the interpreter. Hence, to grasp the meaning of a text, we have to “translate it into our own language”; that is, we have to relate it “to the whole complex of possible meanings in which we linguistically move” (TM, 397). Although the pietist tradition has also recognised that a certain *subtilitas explicandi* is an integral part of every understanding,⁴ in *Truth and Method* it is Heidegger’s analysis of the existential fore-structure of understanding that provides an ontological justification for this notion.⁵ In brief, it demonstrates that the *Dasein* that we are is inherently interpretative and that it can only understand something new on the basis of a certain preunderstanding of how that thing could relate to its own possibilities of existence.

An important epistemological consequence of this structure is that there is no *tabula rasa* in comprehension because our own preconceptions, which are to a large extent inherited from the specific cultural, historical and linguistic context in which we find ourselves, are always involved when attempting to make sense of an unknown phenomenon. In this sense, Gadamer affirms that every understanding is ultimately also self-understanding.⁶ Yet, he suggests that such a circularity is not a *circulus vitiosus*, a methodological fallacy that ought to be avoided, but an existential movement that results from the facticity of our condition, that is, from our embedment in a linguistic world that is “always already” structured with configurations

⁴ As noted by Gadamer in TM, 306.

⁵ See Section 4 of Part II: “Elements of a theory of hermeneutic experience”, especially (A) “The hermeneutic circle and the problem of prejudices” (267-305).

⁶ See notably Gadamer 1962.

of meaning that circumscribe our concrete prospects of thoughts and actions. Of course, that does not mean we should be allowed to uncritically project our expectations onto the text we are reading, but simply that no fruitful engagement with it would be possible if we did not have some kind of bond with the subject matter:

it is impossible to understand what the work has to say if it does not speak into a familiar world that can find a point of contact with what the text says. (TM, 439)

Nevertheless, by affirming that “a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends” (TM, 335), Gadamer expressly puts into question an assumption that prevails in many hermeneutical approaches, namely, that a text can only be understood “objectively” if the “subjective” contribution of the interpreter is excluded from the process. In accordance with the methodology developed in the natural sciences, an interpretation is conceived as the disinterested reproduction, guided by a canon of rules, of an original production of meaning. Such a meaning can be traced back either to the author’s intention or its historical context of emergence. From a phenomenological perspective, however, not only is it naive to presume that the interpreter could step outside the horizon of understanding in which they live to apprehend the text “neutrally”, but such a request actually undermines what understanding, as “present participation in what is said”, truly is:

to try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us. (TM, 398)

We have seen that a written document, as the result of a kind of self-alienation of language, is a strange phenomenon. We have also seen that the reader’s task is to overcome this alienation by reinserting the sayings of the text “into the living present of conversation” (TM, 362). For Gadamer, that does not mean reconstructing a past conversation, but engaging in a new one by allowing the text’s own claim to truth to resonate within our current concerns. Because understanding never happens in a vacuum and inescapably unfolds from a particular perspective, it always goes beyond the mere reconstruction of a closed world, be it the psyche of another human being or a fragment of a distant epoch. Instead, it entails the integration of what is said in the reader’s general knowledge of themselves and their world. While the implicit supposition behind the “psychological” or “historical” approach is that the document at hand is so foreign that it cannot be understood “substantively” – that is, with re-

gard to its own *Sache* –, philosophical hermeneutics maintains that the miracle of understanding is precisely that a statement that was once distant and strange can become absolutely contemporaneous. However, such a marvel is only possible if the interpreter genuinely takes up into himself what is said to him until he can find an answer in his own language.

Following these considerations about the mandatory *application* to the situation of the reader, we can see why translation would be seen as a useful model for hermeneutics. Indeed, the translator's task is obviously not the "re-awakening of the original process in the writer's mind" (TM, 387) nor the exact reproduction of a past occurrence. Rather, it is to produce a *new text* whose explicit aim is to be understood in a situation that is different from that of the author. Additionally, the mere fact that foreign texts are translated emphasises how some elementary preunderstanding is indispensable for the intelligible access to an unfamiliar phenomenon – the most basic requirement being the knowledge of the language through which it speaks. Finally, translation is exemplary for hermeneutics because it shows how bridging the distance that separates a discourse from the reader does not call for the strict exclusion of the reader's present situation. Surely, it would be absurd to demand that the translator, in order to be "objective" or historically and psychologically accurate, completely disregard the particularities of their own language and the horizon of expectations of the public for whom their translation is intended. On the contrary, it is generally endorsed that a certain adaptation of the original text, in accordance with the hermeneutical situation of the reader, is an integral part of what a translation is – and not something like subjective interference that ought to be avoided at all costs. In support of this, we can read in the *Translator's Charter*, as adopted by the International Federation of Translators (FIT) in 1963, that

a faithful translation, however, should not be confused with a literal translation, the fidelity of a translation not excluding an adaptation to make the form, the atmosphere and deeper meaning of the work felt in another language and country. (1963, 183)

If the fundamental task of hermeneutics is to bring a text to speak, the example of translation reminds us that no text really speaks if it does not speak words that can reach the reader.

2.2 A Linguistic Mediation

As indicated by the notion of *application*, the experience of understanding is characterised by a certain tension between the estranged language of the foreign text and the concrete situation in which it

can be understood by the reader. Gadamer's contention is that interpretation consists neither in the transposition of the self into an alien world nor the unilateral assimilation of the encountered alterity into our own horizon of understanding, but in the coming together of two horizons that, at first, seemed irreconcilable. In such a *fusion of horizons*, the interpreter's own perspective is clearly decisive and essential, but

not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one's own what the text says. (TM, 390)

Such an overcoming of differences is possible because understanding happens in the universal medium of language, which is both the *middle* in which the I and the Thou can meet and the *means* through which meaning can be communicated. From a hermeneutical perspective, the language in which we live is not a tool at our disposal nor an enclosure from which we can not escape; rather, it is "the fundamental mode of operation" of our existence and the "all-embracing form of the constitution of the world" (Gadamer 1966, 3). Indeed, as long as we live in a common language, nothing is completely foreign to us since it is always possible to widen our (inevitably limited) horizon of understanding by asking more questions and to correct our misconceptions by seeking clarifications. The mediating power of language is noticeably at work when, during an authentic dialogue, two parties with conflicting positions manage, through a frank and open exchange of views, to gradually open themselves to the claim of the other until an agreement about the discussed topic can be achieved. The phenomenon of translation also bears witness to the incredible reach of this medium: it demonstrates the possibility of communicating beyond the frontiers of our own linguistic situation by means of the discourse of an *interpretes* who is, so to speak, at home in both of these worlds.

The translator, who has to reconcile the sayings of the original document and the resources of the target language, is like a mediator who is painfully aware of the fundamental discrepancies between two parties. Nevertheless, it might still be possible, through a to-and-fro process of weighing and comparing potentialities, of balancing a mandatory renunciation here with a fortuitous enrichment there, to find a compromise,⁷ that is, a "language that is not only his but is also proportionate to the original" (TM, 389). Much like our

⁷ Eco 2003 notably conceived translation as a negotiation process with losses and gains.

horizons of understanding, our historical languages are characterised by a certain plasticity and porosity, by their innate capacity to accommodate themselves to one another. In translation, there is undoubtedly a reciprocity involved: on one hand, a translator might be able to come closer to the text's original sayings by integrating loan words, creating neologisms, emulating idiomatic expressions and foreign syntactic structures, etc. On the other hand, the sayings of the source text might be viewed in a different light when transposed and laid out in another linguistic context. In dialogue and in translation alike, what is extraordinary with this "imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other's position" (TM, 388) is that it allows for something that transcends the subjectivity of the individuals involved to come into presence: a *logos* "which is neither mine nor yours" (TM, 361) but that transforms both through the emergence of a common understanding.

Gadamer's most famous insight is that "Being that can be understood is language" (TM, 470). Language is, however, not only the *middle ground* in which a mutual agreement about a subject matter can take place, it is also the *means* through which reality is intelligible to us. However, Gadamer remarks that language is so "uncannily near our thinking" (TM, 370) that we tend not to notice its presence. It is the paradox of this linguistic mediation – thus qualified as *total*⁸ – that when the right words are found, that is, the ones that allow the subject matter to shine, it is only the thing itself that appears in front of us, while the means that contributed to this apparition disappear. Notwithstanding, we might become aware of the role played by language in the transmission of meaning when the channel of communication is somewhat deficient. Such is the case, for example, when we attend a poorly executed recitation and can not quite grasp what the text was actually meant to say because the speaker has not properly articulated the emphases and inflections dictated by the text itself. Similarly, a translated sentence not fundamentally rearranged in accordance with the genius of the target language appears not as a speech, but as a sequence of "letters without spirit", as "a pale map of a territory instead of the territory itself" (Gadamer 2007, 106). It is commonplace to say that the competent translator is "invisible";⁹ by that, we usually mean that the text they produced is wholly at the service of the original sayings, to the point where the reader should not detect that they are reading a translated text. According to Gadamer, the same could be said about the skilled interpreter, whose explanatory discourse is also destined to disappear when understanding is brought about. That such linguistic intervention has happened

⁸ TM, 118.

⁹ See Venuti 2017.

can nevertheless be attested by the fact that when we have truly understood something, we are spontaneously able to express it in our own words. In translation, the mediation of language is made apparent because it has to be explicitly and consciously created.

2.3 A Practical Deliberation

The conceptualisation of understanding as “a reciprocal relationship of the same kind as conversation” (TM, 370) is not only a metaphor intended to expose the alterity of the hermeneutical phenomenon by depicting it as a Thou who addresses and answers us. It is also a concrete description of the interpretation process, which unfolds as a dialectical exchange of questions and answers between the text, whose statements put into question the reader’s prior knowledge, and the interpreter, who can then ask follow-up questions until their rudimentary comprehension of the subject at hand is confirmed by the reality of the text. Hence, the “faithfulness to the original” might be the translator’s watchword, but the proper working out of the preliminary expectations with regard to the “thing itself” is also the “first, last and constant task in interpreting” (TM, 269). Gadamer notes that, when we engage in a genuine dialogue, it is not quite true that we conduct it; rather, we allow ourselves to be conducted by the topic in question and by “the play of language itself, which addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfils itself in the answer” (TM, 484). In this sense, the conscientious reader is like the player who has decided to surrender the autonomy of their own will to the authority of the game and who then lets themselves be transported by the back-and-fro movement, which is “the actual *subjectum*” of playing. Indeed, we might forget how constraining a conversation actually is. After all, a question is less the product of our own volition than something that comes down on us, startles us and orients our thinking in a certain direction. Moreover, a question, even an open-ended one, brings with itself a scope of relevance that restricts the possibilities of answers. Put simply, the structural analogy between the game and the hermeneutical experience ought to emphasise that, in every understanding, a certain “margin of manoeuvre” (*Spielraum*) is granted for the interpretation of the reader while also reminding that this contingent contribution is entirely bounded by the overarching authority of the language in which this interplay takes place.

Gadamer is, however, well aware that the laws that preside over the realm of human behavior and communication are not the universal and immutable ones of the natural sciences and that deduction-based reasonings alone cannot ensure proper conduct in such a realm. For that reason, he maintains that hermeneutics requires a particular kind of practical wisdom that is not concerned

with the eternal truths of science, nor with the learned expertise of the technician, but with the capacity to determine how we concretely ought to act in view of the changing circumstances in which we find ourselves. Aristotle called *phronesis* such a judgment in uncertainty that cannot be secured through rules alone and that requires constant deliberation on the part of the knowing agent, whose whole being is involved in the process. Although the compelling power of logical and mathematical proofs cannot be expected in moral knowledge, it must be noted that, insofar as this “virtue of thoughtful reflection” is guided by the prevailing *ethos* of the community and by the general question of the good, it is not the mere expression of subjective preferences.

The dynamic and practical dimension of hermeneutics is particularly apparent in translation, notably because the writing process emphasises the sequence of decisions through which a first draft is corrected, revised, and perfected in accordance with the text itself and with the spirit of the languages involved. Echoing Gadamer’s use of the concept of play, the translator and translation scholar Paepcke (1981, 11 f.) compared the translator to the chess player who has the liberty to choose each of their singular moves while having to abide by the general rules of the game. Following the hermeneutical assumption that languages are historical forms of life that entail irregularities before being the systematised nomenclature we can find in grammar books, he pointed out that a certain freedom “in the details”, namely, in the choice of the formulation, is inescapable in translation. Indeed, not only can a word mean different things – it is the well-known phenomenon of polysemy – but it is also possible to express the same thing in different ways, for example, with the use of synonyms, paraphrases, and other forms of what Jakobson (1959, 233) called “intralingual translation”. The variability in the concrete use of language is further illustrated by the fact that the intended meaning of a word is not limited to the literal description inscribed in a dictionary but often incorporates emotional and imaginative associations that are, to a large extent, related to a specific socio-cultural environment. Consequently, when the translator is confronted with an ambiguous expression that does not have a perfect equivalent in the target language, that is, a term that covers the same exact range of denotations and connotations, they cannot do otherwise but

to decide amongst the possibilities that emanated from the semantic spectrum of the word, which one, with regard to the source text, ought to be concretised *hic et nunc*. (Paepcke 1974, 139; Author’s transl.)

The translator is routinely faced with linguistic conundrums that do not have a straightforward solution. In some cases, many possibilities might be acceptable, even though each of them would likely emphasise a slightly different aspect of the original occurrence. That does not mean, however, that a word can be translated in any old way. Instead, the best possible option has to be selected in compliance with a variety of textual and extratextual factors, including the context in which an expression is used, the general intention and tone of the source text, the internal consistency of the target text, the expectations of the publisher and of the target audience, the general do's and don'ts of translation, etc.

It was Paepcke's conviction, however, that the best decision is not made by a "transcoding machine" that has gained mastery over rigid semiotic systems. In his opinion, the proper conduct in the sphere of language requires qualities that are both specifically human and difficult to objectify such as intuition, creativity, empathy and a particular sensitivity for the sound and sense of an idiom. In reference to Pascal's famous distinction between the mathematical and the intuitive mind, he suggested that the translation competence should combine the *esprit de géométrie*, a reasoning power that methodically draws conclusions from clearly defined principles, with the *esprit de finesse*, a broader "sight" that can grasp multiple elements at once and see connections on the basis of ambiguous guidelines that fall under the guise of common sense and ordinary usage. Like the Aristotelian *phronesis*, such a "sense of great delicacy and precision" (Pascal, 512) is not a technique that can be learned and methodically applied, as it is a kind of knowing faculty that has to be cultivated within the knowing individual and that can be improved through experience.

To sum it up, the practice of translation is exemplary for hermeneutics because it illustrates both the interpretative leeway that is naturally granted in the territory of communication and expression and the restricting factors that are related to the use of a language that is never simply a private affair. In fact, Gadamer holds the view that, like playing, conversing, and translating, interpreting is a particular kind of action in which the subject is neither quite active nor fully passive.¹⁰ By that, he means that once we humbly accept to put our capacity of judgement at the service of the text, we are, to some extent, "acted upon", we undergo an experience we cannot fully control. Considering that the aim of his hermeneutics is to "discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it" (TM, 301), notably by underlining how both the object and the act of understanding fall under the subjugating eminence of language, we might begin to understand how philosophically relevant the practice of translation is.

10 On the concept of the *middle voice* in Gadamer's hermeneutics, see Ebehard 2004.

3 Conclusion: Translation as Interpretation

In the context of a broader reflection about the notion of truth and objectivity in the human sciences, the characterisation of *interpretation as a translation* – that is, as a mediating process that is inherently linguistic and that cannot be brought about without “a present involvement in what is said” (TM, 393) – proves to be fruitful: not only does it highlight the universal medium of understanding, but it also indicates the limits of the scientific ideal of neutrality, which excludes from the realm of “objective knowledge” all those experiences in which a subject is personally involved. Ultimately, it is because Gadamer esteems that “understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood” (TM, xxviii) that the productive but ancillary task of translation is paradigmatic in his hermeneutics.

As concluding thoughts, we would like to turn this characterisation around and suggest that the conceptualisation of *translation as an interpretation*, that is, as a hermeneutical process that is unavoidably accomplished by a historically situated human being, could, in return, be beneficial for translation studies if this field wishes to obtain a better understanding of what its object of research actually is.¹¹ Obviously, there is no use in looking for a “translation manual” or for a systematised explanation of language in Gadamer’s hermeneutics since it was never his intention to prescribe a canon of interpretative rules. Moreover, there is no denying that phenomenological depictions such as the *fusion of horizons*, the *dialogue with the text* and the *game of language* do not, in their purely descriptive form, comply with the criteria of methodological validity. For these reasons, it is understandable why hermeneutics, especially Gadamerian hermeneutics, would often be overlooked in translation studies,¹² dismissed as a kind of “speculation without scientific value”,¹³ or treated with a “rather incomprehensible” indulgence.¹⁴ Fortunately, this situation is progressively changing, notably though the conjoined efforts of Stolze, Cercel, Stanley and others to explore how we can make use of the hermeneutical paradigm in translation theory and practice. The aim of this paper is not to address all the points of convergence and divergence between hermeneutics and translation studies, but rather to give an overview of the philosophical relevance of

11 A thesis advanced by translational hermeneutics (*Übersetzungshermeneutik*) is that their approach comes the closest to the daily reality of the translator. See notably Stolze 2003 and 2011; Cercel 2009a; Stanley 2021.

12 A notable exception can be found in the recent monography by Piecychna 2021, which deals specifically with the notion of the “translator’s competence” with regard to Gadamer’s philosophy.

13 Noted by Cercel 2009b, 338.

14 Piecychna 2021, 17.

translation, as shown in Gadamer's work. However, we would like to suggest, as a guiding idea, that Gadamer's contention about the human sciences – namely, that they are too dominated by the methodological ideal of the natural sciences, whereas they actually “stand closer to moral knowledge than to that kind of ‘theoretical’ knowledge” (TM, 312) – could also apply to a possible “science of translation”. In this context, the contribution of philosophical hermeneutics would not be something like a new method, but, above all, a renewed appreciation for the ancient wisdom of *phronesis*. The recollection of this “know-how”, which is both moral and practical, could call attention to the fact that, in the hazardous domain of historical languages and human communication, mastered techniques or learned principles can not spare the task of deliberation. In accordance with the phenomenological impulse towards the “*Sache selbst*”, the idea would be to provoke a shift in perspective from translation as the result of equivalence-based transposition protocols that ought to be “objective” and “value-free” to translation as a *practical activity* that involves a variety of non-deductive reasonings and non-objectifiable competences and that requires active engagement on the part of the translator.

Following the path laid out by the aforementioned Paepcke, scholars have already advocated that, instead of pursuing the somewhat illusory dream of objectivity, translation studies should aim at securing a kind of “intersubjective plausibility”¹⁵ by ensuring the translator is capable of corroborating their individual choices with the help of the conceptual tools developed by various disciplines such as linguistics, cognitive sciences, psychology, communication theory and, one can hope, philosophy. While it is understandable that the relatively recent field of translatology would be eager to prove the validity of its knowledge with the help of objectifiable criteria and procedures, philosophical hermeneutics could bring to mind that translation is not so much an *experiment*, in the sense of a controlled operation that expressly excludes contingent factors to consistently yield the same results, but that it is rather an *experience* that includes its share of risks and surprises and cannot take place without the participation of a thinking and acting individual who is “a player and co-player and not a bystander” (Paepcke 1985, 161). In the affairs of language, a part of risk might be unavoidable, but it is precisely this risk that brings about the involvement and the excitement that makes understanding into an event that moves us and an experience that transforms us.

¹⁵ See Bălăcescu, Stefanink 2009; Cercel 2010.

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The Limits and Cognitive Resources of Translating On Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics

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Abstract Hermeneutical thought suggests that translating involves not only transporting or mediating meanings, but also 'acting' on a communicative level, and putting different perspectives into dialogue. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, I describe translation as both a process and a task that we have to take on due to the plurality of languages and the opacity of meaning. In this sense, translation is a creative work of reinvention from a cognitive point of view. It can become a pluralistic paradigm, as a model of mediation, elaboration, and recognition. In conclusion, translation can be seen as an act of recognition of oneself and the other, as well as a gesture of hospitality and gratitude.

Keywords Paul Ricoeur. Knowledge. Hermeneutics. Mediation. Recognition. Compromise. Linguistic Hospitality. Pluralism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Different Words, Different Perspectives. – 3 'Mediating' Languages and Identities. – 4 On the Concept of the Linguistic Absolute. – 5 What is an 'Éthos of Translation'? – 6 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

In this article I want to explore some possible characterisations of translation when it is understood as more than an act of transformation in a strictly linguistic sense. While the connection between philosophy and translation has been investigated from many angles, it remains something of an open question. In particular, my aim here is to investigate this problem from a hermeneutic-philosophical perspective. Understanding translation as interpretation makes it possible to recognise both its theoretical-cognitive and ethical-pragmatic traits. Hermeneutics shows us that translating involves not only transporting or mediating meanings, but also 'acting' on a communicative level. It shows that translation is a dialogical act, which helps to recognise different truths. I will primarily engage with the work of Paul Ricoeur, since he has carefully analysed the question of translation and the many philosophical themes connected to it, such as those of language, meaning, dialogue, and truth (cf. Jervolino 2008; Canullo 2017).

The central idea of my contribution is that the specific linguistic-hermeneutic act of translating could become an important topic in today's debate on cultural pluralism, particularly if translation is understood as a form of knowledge and recognition, of self-decentering and openness to the other. I will also ask the following question: could translation be understood as a possible and persuasive model of intercultural communication?

From a philosophical perspective, translating can be described as a dialogical act because it has always to do with different points of view. 'Saying otherwise' means above all recognising another way of knowing. The translator approaches different languages and forms of knowledge: he transfers messages or contents from one linguistic-cultural subject to another, but we can also recognise his task – specifically gnoseological – of putting different perspectives in communication. If translation is both an encounter between languages and a confrontation between cultures, it involves at the same time going out of oneself, finding oneself in the space of difference and experiencing the reality of others. All these are conditions without which knowledge cannot be realised. Translation is an activity that makes it possible to go beyond what is already known and to never stop knowing what is different. Translation is a real cognitive challenge, which is both necessary and yet not achievable in an absolute and definitive way (we can never say 'the same thing'). However, in the following I want to show that, from a cognitive point of view, the impossibility of synonymy is not a defeat, but rather constitutes the condition of the act of translation itself as an infinite process.

2 Different Words, Different Perspectives

Revisiting some of the most influential research in the area, we can recognise the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson as having described translation as a metalinguistic operation of the transmission and transposition of messages. As part of the communicative functions of language, translation makes it possible to recode the content of the message and therefore its overall cognitive meaning. Translating means communicating the same units of conceptual information in different verbal and grammatical forms (Jakobson 1959). In the background we can recognise a kind of linguistic and cultural universalism that leads Jakobson to explain translation according to a universal model. But is the act of translation exclusively one of interlinguistic decoding? Translation is also an act of concretising the language, an individual operation of interpreting messages placed in texts and contexts that inevitably condition the meaning of the message itself. Therefore, it follows that this linguistic universalism does not allow us to recognise translation as an experience of confrontation with historical, axiological, and cultural systems that can also be irreducibly different from ours.¹

On the other hand, Quine considers any translation as always provisional, because there are no units of meaning that can represent the common interlinguistic basis in the passage from one language to another; furthermore, there are no synonymous units of meaning. The meaning is not attributable to an isolated conceptual content or to a single sentence, but instead refers to a global, holistic dimension, a network of connections whose terms are inseparable from the context. Quine explains translation according to an indeterminate model. The translational process is indeterminate because for each signifier there is not a corresponding atom of meaning that supports the translational passages; the process is only possible in relation to the complete systems of meanings, languages, and cultures taken in their entirety. In this conception it is a question of defining semantic correlations between the utterances of the two languages, since the aim is not the translation of words but that of coherent speeches (Quine 1951; 1959; 1960).

Assuming that there are no universal significant entities, there can be no translation in an absolute sense, that is, translation understood as the transfer of units of meaning from one code to another. The meanings contain within themselves the history of the texts and the contexts in which they arose, and as such acquire relevance on-

¹ The limits of this form of linguistic universalism are well analysed by Borutti and Heidmann 2012. I will refer to this study, which is important in several respects, especially in the first part of my contribution.

ly in relation to the overall set of signs of a culture. There are many possible translations. Starting from this perspective, it is possible to begin to understand that, if translating corresponds to being in the plurality of languages and cultures, then understanding the 'stranger' presupposes interpretative hypotheses that are necessarily formulated within a specific linguistic and cultural position. When we translate, we interpret the other on the basis of ourselves, of our own signifying systems. Only through a hermeneutic approach can we understand translation as an interpretative-cognitive practice of difference and plurality, both in relation to the other and in relation to oneself. It is worth adding, in this context, that even the constitution of identity presupposes an interpretative and translational distance from oneself and from others (Borutti, Heidmann 2012, 66).

In Gadamer's philosophy, the translational distance represents the fundamental structure of understanding. Indeed, it can even be considered at the origin of modern hermeneutics: it defines a separation, but also a meeting space. From a hermeneutic point of view, the translation-interpretation searches for the meaning of the text through the understanding that the reader has of himself. In this sense, we can also add that the self understands himself through the stranger. I interpret myself starting from the other. In the act of translation, what Gadamer calls the "fusion of horizons" is realised: it occurs as effective participation in a common sense, as a comparison and integration of different perspectives, beyond their specific distance (Gadamer 2004, 384-91). The translation is now explained according to an *integrated* model.

But from the distance of the interpretative and translating act, does an ideal increase in meaning and truth naturally follow? It could be that this form of distance becomes a cognitive space, precisely because differences can certainly meet there, but they can also diverge and clash. Each concrete language expresses certain perspectives of meaning within specific cultural contexts, even if the meaning itself is not always already given. By translating, we realise that understanding develops not just in a cooperative way, but also through conflicts, ruptures, and negotiations; so much so that sometimes it becomes impossible to reconstruct a connection of meanings. Thus, translation is not impossible, but rather imperfect.

Hermeneutics should then face a new task: it should integrate the possibility of understanding with the opacity of meaning. In other words, translation is not simply equivalent to transferring an original text into another significant reality; instead, the process of translating corresponds to an act of dialogical production of the text itself. All this does not imply the identification of lexical and syntagmatic equivalences; rather, it involves a process of reconstruction and integration of meanings, transformations, and continuous compromises, due to the opacity of personal and cultural identities.

As a form of mediation and negotiation, translation makes dialogue possible. It does not achieve a transparency of meaning and includes the possibility of failing to understand each other. Hence, it follows the need for an infinite translational mediation. The act of translating is a dynamic process of decentralisation and appropriation that seeks continuous compromises; it is not a static conservation of what is already known, but a reinvention, reconstruction of an open and living work. It rediscovers and reinvents reality; it expands and makes languages and cultures grow.

In my view, we ought to see translation as a sort of dialogical exchange whose philosophically most significant outcome is the discovery of identity, that is, the discovery of “oneself as another” (Ricoeur 1995). Translation can be compared to the specifically creative act of practical wisdom, which in the hermeneutic tradition is precisely understood as the capacity for confrontation and dialogue in concrete situations. Translation is a difficult exercise in negotiation, in managing possible conflicts; in this sense, it could be recognised as a concrete example of what Ricoeur calls “critical *phronesis*” (Ricoeur 1995, 240-96). A *hospitable* translation model is now emerging. Translating is “linguistic hospitality” (Ricoeur 2006, 9). It is the concrete way in which truths that come from different, foreign languages, and which cannot be uttered in one’s mother tongue, are accepted.

3 ‘Mediating’ Languages and Identities

In hermeneutical thought, it is impossible to ignore the problem of the possible opacity of meaning (Borutti, Heidmann 2012, 107), and therefore the possible untranslatability of the text. Consequently, interpretation is understood as the ability to implement compromises and negotiations, that is, actions that in concrete situations do not erase the difference and ambiguity of meaning. I propose to conceive the translation itself as an ideally normative paradigm within situations of contact or exchange between different cultures. Translation is certainly exemplary of the possibility of intercultural dialogue: the exchange between cultures is also given as an exchange of linguistic signs and meanings. But why should we see the act of translation as an ideal figure, a reference point for achieving effective communication between different cultures? Indeed, we know the possible ‘shadows’ that follow translational activities: some translations are incorrect, some fail in their purpose, some are misleading or misunderstand their source material, some might even be tendentious and biased; not to mention all those cases in which translating becomes a mode of appropriation or assimilation, so as to remove the unknown, the other, the stranger who is feared.

Just as in interpersonal relationships there is never a form of authenticity that is limpidly known by oneself and by others (people will always have some traits that remain unknowable and dynamic) (Larmore 2010), so in translation there is never a perfect and immediately transparent result (translation always remains opaque). I ask again: can the act of translation be configured as a model of intercultural communication, and if so, how? To answer this question, it is necessary to describe the translational act in all its complexity. I would like to propose three conceptual categories that allow us to see how translation can be understood as a model of communication in a specifically relational and pluralistic sense:

- a. as a model of *mediation* (§ 3);
- b. as a model of *elaboration* (§ 4);
- c. as a model of *recognition* (§ 5).

First, translation is a model of mediation in which the translator builds a bridge to connect two poles and bring them into contact. On the one hand, there is the work, the author, his language; on the other, there is the reader of the translated text; in the middle is the translator, who is an authentic hermeneut and mediator, who transmits a message from one language to another, trying to respond to different requests. We can repeat with Schleiermacher (2002; cf. Camera 2017) that the translator should bring “the reader to the author” respecting his “vow of faithfulness” (the author requests to be translated faithfully), and yet at the same time the translator should bring “the author to the reader” (for the reader is aware of how the translator can betray the author) (Ricoeur 2006, 3). The translator has to work to overcome the ‘resistances’ that emerge from both poles in question and therefore to achieve a sort of interlingual and intercultural reconciliation.

In this sense, the translator has the primary task of meeting the resistance constituted by the text to be translated. This text becomes the expression of any foreign reality that does not want to be distorted and wants to be faithfully mediated: it contrasts any type of appropriation, so much so that it sometimes claims its own untranslatability. Secondly, the translator should also overcome the resistance of the reader of the text, i.e. the resistance of the language into which the text is to be translated. It is a position of sacralisation of one's mother tongue (Ricoeur 2006, 3); here, moreover, an exasperated sense of self-sufficiency gives rise to linguistic ethnocentrism and cultural hegemony. In both cases, translation becomes a way to overcome these forms of identity-based resistance. Antoine Berman (1992) describes this double resistance very clearly and considers the translator's effort as ambivalent. The translator wants to push on two fronts: he wants to force his language to take charge of the other language; and he wants to force the other language to move into his

mother tongue (Ricoeur 2006, 8). The translation carries out a form of mediation, which goes beyond the closure afforded by two different linguistic universes; the translation sits at a crossroads where identity claims are mitigated and the possible tensions that may exist between the original text and the reader, with their different cultural identities, are relieved.

Translating is a form of mediation, then, in which a constitutive universalistic and at the same time pluralistic openness finds expression. There are two key reasons for this act of mediation. First, although all men speak, they speak different languages: in fact, there is no single language, but many idioms. Secondly, although there can never be a common universal language, the different languages are not so foreign to each other that they cannot be translated. Against any position of empirical relativism and any assertion of absolute untranslatability, Ricoeur suggests postulating “the principle of universal translatability” (Ricoeur 1996, 5). There is no doubt that translating is a difficult, sometimes impossible task. The foreign word is always an open challenge for us, because in any case it places us in front of specific segments of “intermittent untranslatability” (Ricoeur 2006, 6). It is also evident that translating is a ‘drive’ inherent in humankind, but one whose satisfaction is always incomplete if not outright denied. Yet, the translation continues to represent the figure of mediation, of being in the middle, of being in the balance ‘between’ different linguistic and cultural poles, demonstrating that it is still possible to exchange and identify equivalent and similar elements of meaning, and therefore comparable, if not fully corresponding, texts.

In this context, mediating means, according to Marcel Detienne’s formula, “constructing comparables” (Detienne 2008, 22): translating entails building possible equivalents in the passage from one thought to another that is completely foreign, from one language to another that is initially untranslatable. From this point of view, Ricoeur pays particular attention to the philosopher and sinologist François Jullien, and especially his attempt to describe the Chinese language as the absolute other of the Greek language. To describe this gap, Jullien explains, for example, that the Chinese language does not have verb tenses because it has not elaborated the same concept of time as the West. Like the translator in front of the original text, Jullien looks for those “equivalents without identity” (Ricoeur 2006, 37) that allow us as far as possible to understand the foreigner.

Ricoeur was so drawn to Jullien’s studies, in particular *Du “temps”. Éléments d’une philosophie du vivre* (2001), that he wrote an extensive analysis of this work (Ricoeur 2003). Here he suggests to the French sinologist that it is not possible to relate cultures (for example, Greek and Chinese) by overcoming any form of comparison and provisional equivalences. In fact, we cannot think that there is an ‘independent’ thought or language that can judge all the others. Jullien

himself, when he shows what Chinese is or is not in comparison with Western languages, however, writes in French and therefore he too contributes to constructing comparables. Ricoeur proposes that Jullien use the category of translation, in order to describe the concrete mechanism of mediation between heterogeneous cultural-linguistic universes, between “heterotopic” intelligibilities that would otherwise remain mutually inaccessible (Ricoeur 2003, 214). According to Ricoeur, Jullien’s work demonstrates that only starting from a particular language, in his case French, is it possible to designate a word with another, lexically similar one. Therefore, it confirms that his attempt to deconstruct the Western language through the Chinese one cannot be seen as an action that is carried out from the outside, by a hypothetical *super partes* language, but rather represents a moment of reflexivity of the language itself. Only starting from this linguistic self-awareness can we really begin to translate, that is, to de-categorise and re-categorise our own language (reflexivity) and the foreign language (welcoming) in a pluralistic perspective.

Later, perhaps thanks to Ricoeur’s observations, Jullien devoted much of his time to the theme of translation, giving it a prominent place in his studies. What is his debt to Ricoeur? Similarly, Jullien begins from a sharp critique of the concept of identity as a static reality and develops the idea of a “cultural universal” as an unfinished process (Jullien 2014). Furthermore, by focusing on concepts such as tolerance, mediation, and understanding, he uses the term of translation to present his model of intercultural dialogue. Jullien goes so far as to affirm that the most suitable language for conducting an effective dialogue between cultures can only be the language of translation, that is, the language of each interlocutor: everyone will converse in his own language translating the other (Jullien 2014). Speaking a single language, cultures could no longer reflect each other – according to the dialectic of *Soi-même comme un autre* (Ricoeur 1995) – and their respective and different resources of thought could no longer be recognised. In an authentic intercultural perspective, languages will discover each other: every thought-language mitigates and moderates its identity claims and ensures that dialogue can take place.² I would therefore conclude that Jullien, like Ricoeur, seems to present translation as the only means by which it is possible to compare these different perspectives and therefore, as far as possible, to construct comparables. Yet, also in his case, the translation is never perfectly complete, but leaves hidden what is still living and incomparable in the languages themselves.

² From this point of view, the tool of dialogue cannot be a mediating language, for example globalised English (‘globish’), but the continuous and persistent action of each language and each act of translation (cf. Jullien 2014; 2021).

4 On the Concept of the Linguistic Absolute

Translation is also a model of elaboration. The translator is the first to experience in himself the two types of 'resistance'; he is required to carry out a task that is not so dissimilar to what in psychoanalytic terms is the work of mourning. Even in every translational act it is a question of elaborating an experience of 'loss', of defeat: it is a question of accepting the impossibility of producing a complete and definitive translation, and therefore of obtaining any form of assimilation or identification with the other. It is a question of accepting the distance between oneself and the stranger, which no act of translation will be able to overcome. In other words, it is necessary to renounce "the ideal of perfect translation" (Ricoeur 2006, 8).

The full realisation of the translatability principle is never possible. In this sense, there is no criterion that can absolutely establish a good translation, because there is no "third text" (Ricoeur 2006, 7) between the original and the translated text, that is, there is not another text that can be understood as the bearer of the true meaning and therefore as a judgment criterion to verify if the translator is really saying the same thing as the original author. From this perspective, we can ask the following question: is it really possible to think that there is a perfect and original language, that there are universal and common linguistic structures towards which every translation effort would ideally be oriented? Can we really think that translation is nothing other than saying absolutely the same thing, that is, a sort of remedy for overcoming the multiplicity of languages? Or are we to think that all this – that is, wanting to translate into a universal common language – is necessary since the evident plurality of languages would even be harmful from the perspective of evolutionary adaptation and would make communication between humans more difficult?

In reality, there is no form of "linguistic absolute" (Ricoeur 2006, 9), a *super partes* universal language that can fully bridge the distance between oneself and the stranger. A form of linguistic absolute is, according to Ricoeur, the cosmopolitan dream of the Enlightenment to establish a universal library, containing translations of all works in all languages. The purpose of this ideal is "to fill the interlinguistic space of communication and make good the lack of universal language" (Ricoeur 2006, 8). A linguistic absolute is also the ideal of a pure language which, as in the case of Walter Benjamin, constitutes the messianic echo that every translation would have within itself (Benjamin 1972). These ideals of linguistic absoluteness and perfect translation start from universalist and pluralist instances and have the aim of not absolutising one's own language, and yet paradoxically they lead to the forgetting of both the foreign language and one's own language. Those who accept this linguistic universalism

lose their homeland, their linguistic dwelling, becoming “language’s stateless persons”, “exiles who would have given up the search for the asylum afforded by a language of reception” (Ricoeur 2006, 9).

What else is involved in the act of translating? It stems from the desire to overcome anxiety that might be provoked by the presence of the foreigner and his differences, a desire, however, that is destined to always remain unsatisfied. In fact, translators can only continue to search for some form of equivalence between languages, rather than establishing definitive correspondences; they can only identify possible semantic and linguistic passages from one language to another. The activity of translating requires constant revision and re-writing. As Ricoeur writes:

A good translation can aim only at a supposed *equivalence* that is not founded on a demonstrable *identity* of meaning. An equivalence without identity. This equivalence can only be sought, worked at, supposed. And the only way of criticising a translation – something we can always do – is to suggest another supposed, alleged, better or different one. (Ricoeur 2006, 21)

Between the two texts – the original and the translation – there can only be equivalence, never total adaptation, nor full correspondence. As happens in the relationship between the self and the stranger, between identity and otherness, so in the relationship between the original and the translated text, one cannot be reduced to the other. And precisely this impossibility becomes the condition of possibility of any future translation. The “impassable status of dialogicality of the act of translating” (Ricoeur 2006, 9) is the necessary background of the translation itself. A perfect translation would correspond to the saturation of the impulse to translate and thus to the interruption of the desire to dialogue. If there were perfect translation, there would be perfect understanding, and where there is perfect understanding, there is the extinction of the dialogic impulse.

In this sense, it is possible to argue that the act of translating can indicate both the finitude and the cognitive resources of the human being. We can then conclude that if the act of translating is based on this original anthropological-existential structure, then the will to translate cannot be removed, nor can it be extinguished by itself. Acceptance of the loss of the absolute translation is then the presupposition of translating itself; it is what paradoxically makes “translation as source of happiness” possible (Ricoeur 2006, 3).

5 What is an 'Éthos of Translation'?

Finally, translation can be a model of recognition: a mutual recognition, where a reciprocal exchange takes place between the parties involved. From this point of view, let us ask once again: what does it mean to translate? The usual interpretation of the myth of Babel leads us to think that the gigantic biblical tower represents the image of disorder, of the confusion of languages and, therefore, of the lack of communication between men. In this respect, the myth of Babel "lets us imagine [...] a supposed lost paradisiacal language" (Ricoeur 2006, 12). But could we read this mythical tale differently? It could be hypothesised that Babelic multilingualism would not constitute a divine curse, that is, the consequence of God's anger and vengeance for the *hybris* of men. It may be possible to think that linguistic diversity, dispersion, and in a certain sense the resultant incommunicability are not just defeats, but opportunities: the need to translate, which has been ever-present in human history, reveals the intrinsic human aptitude to learn and practice languages other than one's own. The plurality of languages expresses the richness of human life forms and worlds that are interpreted and communicated linguistically. Translation ensures that humanity is not seen as something undifferentiated; it allows languages to coexist, exchanging meanings and increasing the possibilities inherent in them. Babel could be interpreted not so much as a catastrophe, caused by a God who is jealous of humanity's success, but rather as a description – without any form of condemnation – of the potential of languages. Babel is not a condemnation, but an opportunity for thought.³

Here we see the development of a translation paradigm connected to a plural idea of language. To better understand this suggestive conception of language, I would like to recall some passages from the work of Hans Lipps, philosopher of the phenomenological circle of Göttingen, which represents in my opinion one of the little-known sources of Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics and in particular his philosophy of translation. Ricoeur recognised the relevance of this almost forgotten author, who laid the foundations for a non-anti-epistemological reconsideration of philosophical hermeneutics and affirmed the complementarity between the methodical dimension of explanation and the non-methodical one of understanding.⁴ Lipps had the merit of considering language as a sensitive phenomenon,

³ The Babelic confusion of languages and the need for translation are considered in this perspective as conditions of 'differences' and therefore as inexhaustible resources of thought (Borutti, Heidmann 2012, 15; Guibal 2007, 61; Zumthor 1997; Marty 1990; Steiner 1975).

⁴ More generally, Ricoeur affirms that the current relevance of Lipps' thought can be recognised in relation to the tendency of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics to reflect

which has a concrete, pragmatic, and relational function in the mediation of meanings. In this sense, it is not possible to absolutely determine the meaning of words, as if there were “ideal units of meaning” (Lipps 1976); rather, the meaning becomes accessible only when it is concretely realised through the relationship that men have with things and when they use words. Lipps’ hermeneutic logic does not aim to investigate absolute and universal laws or interpretative structures (such as formal logic), but instead seeks to understand the *logos* with which man expresses his experiences and, in different situations, communicates with his interlocutors. The significance of a language is situational; it is the reflection of a certain way of looking at the world. Languages constitute and at the same time reveal specific *Weltanschauungen*. Lipps can be considered an important source of Ricoeur’s philosophy of translation especially if we consider some passages of the work *Untersuchungen zur einer hermeneutischen Logik*, where he describes the mother tongue as an undeniable “legacy”, an indispensable tool for becoming aware of the self. Equally interesting are some passages dedicated to the intrinsic situational and pluralistic meaning of the linguistic phenomenon.

The refraction of things is different in different languages. There is a vision of the world that is specific to each language [...]. The language thus realises the form of existence of a people. In a foreign language, it is a foreign world that finds meaning. (Lipps 1976)

With an explicit reference to Wilhelm von Humboldt, Lipps argues that the single linguistic experience should not be seen as a monad, self-referential and closed in on itself, but rather as a dynamic and open process. The significance of a language is ultimately given in a fundamentally plural horizon, so much so that by learning a foreign language it is possible to become more aware of one’s mother tongue and the mental schemes connected to it. In Lipps’ work we find a hermeneutic conception of translation in contextual, pragmatic, and pluralistic terms, as an effective exchange and as a possibility of welcoming foreign words (Lipps 1976, 85, 95-7).

Here we can recognise quite a few affinities with Ricoeur’s thought. It is precisely starting from these analyses of human language that he comes to revisit the myth of Babel: certainly, man communicates in many different ways, but he is also called to translation, understood even more radically as a condition of possibility, so that his action, and also his words, can continue to be. He translates to broaden the horizon of his language, activating otherwise un-

on the conditions of possibility of its own discourse and not to avoid some logical questions typical of contemporary philosophy (Ricoeur 1981, 181).

used linguistic and cognitive resources. Of course, there are many languages, but there are also many bilingualists, polyglots, and translators. So we can recognise a particular universalist perspective, in which the universal is never given as absolute and pure (just as there is no form of linguistic absolute), but as a localised universal. Translation makes concrete universals possible and rejects the idea of a single abstract universal, outside of history. In this way the act of translating is in the service of the project of a humanity that knows how to remain in plurality (cf. Ricoeur 2004).

Plural thinking involves referring to cultural universals, historically localised, which translation helps to keep alive. Translating preserves rather than eliminates plurality. And even those who intend, in today's geopolitical situation, to justify the establishment of a supranational organisation will have to not only act on the formal level of political and juridical institutions, but also be able to integrate the ethical and spiritual resources of the different peoples.⁵ What can really support the construction of this supranational reality is precisely an "*éthos* of translation" (Ricoeur 1996, 5). By translating, we discover for the first time the possibility of hospitality, that is, of living in another language and, at the same time, of welcoming that language into our own.

As such, the practice of translation becomes a clear example of a hospitable space in the linguistic field. But it is also more than that. According to Ricoeur, translation is closely linked to other forms of reciprocal hospitality between cultures.

It is this which serves as a model for other forms of hospitality that I think resemble it: confessions, religions, are they not like languages that are foreign to one another, with their lexicon, their grammar, their rhetoric, their stylistics which we must *learn* in order to make our way into them? (Ricoeur 2006, 23)

Linguistic hospitality suggests a possible model of interculturality. Indeed, intercultural communication needs "translators from culture to culture", real "cultural bilingualists" (Ricoeur 1996, 5) who know how to navigate different mental universes and beliefs. From this point of view, the translator does not engage in an open conflict with foreign languages, nor does he aim to imprison them (through their detention or assimilation); rather, he is called to dialogue with nomadic and migrant words. The purpose of translation is then lin-

⁵ Ricoeur's analysis of translation can therefore also be used as a paradigm of democratic and international interaction (Dauenhauer 2011). More generally, the connection between translation and the ethical-political dimension is certainly significant (Chiurazzi 2013).

guistic hospitality, understood as a crucial prerequisite of reciprocity and mutual recognition.

Linguistic hospitality, then, where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house. (Ricoeur 2006, 10)⁶

In the context of intercultural dialogue, an authentic, critical, but peaceful discussion is achievable only when following a dialogic-hermeneutic path – a task not unlike that of the translator. As in the case of translation, here too one must learn to recognise differences and, as far as possible, to make them part of oneself.

6 Conclusion

In order to share a dialogue with other perspectives, it is necessary to make an effort of self-critique, accepting to go beyond oneself and becoming aware of one's own fallibility and incompleteness. It is necessary to recover the notion of hospitality which means, first of all, holding different convictions. I believe that in this way it becomes possible to implement a concrete dialogue, an exchange that takes place – like translation – through continuous processes of mutual contamination and strengthening. So personal or cultural identity is no longer rigid, but exploratory and creative; it is understood as a 'translational' identity. By this I mean a 'compromised' identity, which is constituted through continuous compromises and negotiations. I am still referring to an identity 'at work', capable of de-categorising and re-categorising one's own perspectives and those of others, through strong self-awareness (internal re-elaboration), as well as through being open to different cultural worlds.

As Jullien explained, translating corresponds to an effective path of recognition, in which it becomes possible to manage any conflicts or misunderstandings, and at the same time maintain the creative potential of all cultures: "Translation is, in my opinion, the only ethics possible in our future 'global' world" (Jullien 2014, 248). In other words, the need for translation refers to a sort of ethical duty that would require cultures to work together, using phronetic-practical thinking as a guide. The model becomes an ethics that, like trans-

⁶ From a significantly intercultural perspective, Ricoeur also understands linguistic hospitality as "narrative hospitality", as the narrative exchange of histories, memories, and testimonies; he describes this as "taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other" (Ricoeur 1996, 7; Kearney 2019, 7).

lation, is truly applicative, that is, one that is open to situations and aware of the necessarily provisional nature of all solutions.

In conclusion, what can it mean to understand the act of translating/recognising each other as an authentic paradigm of intercultural communication? It means starting to conceive of it, with Ricoeur, neither as form of comparison, appropriation, assimilation, nor as a form of equivalent exchange. A way must be opened to explain translation/ recognition as a gesture of self-giving, according to the specific logic of the gift, that is, as the anthropologist Marcel Hénaff (2010) proposes, “without price”. It is a gift that binds without any expectation of restitution, a gift of response without obligation, as ‘surprising’ as any initial gift (Ricoeur 2007). It is a figure of self-giving beyond any logic of calculation, yet one that is capable of activating movements of ‘mutual indebtedness’. But what does ‘mutual indebtedness’ mean in this context? It could suggest a dynamic and creative identity paradigm in which the act of translating (and of being translated) can be understood, precisely, as a means to better recognise oneself and the other, but it could also, ultimately, operate as an effective ‘gesture of gratitude’.⁷ Translation can become a persuasive model of intercultural communication when it is understood as *reconnaissance*, in the sense of a grateful attitude. It is an ideal destination, distant and perhaps unattainable, and yet one that can, despite the conflicts of history, produce some possible moments of authentic discussion, dialogue, and peace. Perhaps translation might even begin to orient practical action within history itself. We can but hope.

⁷ Understanding translation as a gesture of gratitude suggests the passage from a solely linguistic-cognitive dimension to a pragmatic and strategic one; in this context, translation not only transfers or mediates meanings but becomes a real ‘speech act’ that ‘acts’ on a dialogical-hermeneutic level, ‘building’ a mutual bond of indebtedness and gratitude. The possible relationship between speech act theory and translation activities would certainly need to be explored further (Tipton, Desilla 2019).

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II – Perspectives and Debates

On Joseph Margolis' Aesthetics. A Symposium

edited by Alessandro Cavazzana

Introduction – On Joseph Margolis' Aesthetics. A Symposium

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The second part of this issue hosts a symposium dedicated to the American philosopher Joseph Margolis (1924-2021).

Margolis received his PhD from Columbia University in New York, where he met Arthur C. Danto. And, like Danto – with whom he experienced a relationship of theoretical suspicion, when not of open contrast – Margolis is the author of seminal works in philosophy and ontology of art. Among his most important writings in this field are “The Mode of Existence of a Work of Art” (1958), “The Identity of a Work of Art” (1959), “Describing and Interpreting Works of Art” (1961), “Works of Art as physically Embodied and culturally Emergent Entities” (1974), “The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art” (1977), “Farewell to Danto and Goodman” (1998) and *What, after all, is a Work of Art?* (1999). In the first essays cited above, Margolis introduces and develops arguments that will be taken up, expanded and discussed in the decades to come, namely: the application of the type/token model to the ontology of art (recalled, with due differences, by Wolsterstorff 1975), the idea that works of art are culturally emergent entities, and the view that artworks are embodied in mere physical things but are not identical or reducible to them. Moreover, the type/token model adopted by Margolis would later lead him to clash with Arthur Danto himself. According to Margolis (1998), the paradoxical result of Danto's thesis is that nothing really exists as a work of art, since the properties that make a work of art such cannot, in principle, be perceived. This conclusion is fundamentally unacceptable to Margolis.

Nevertheless, Margolis' work does not only concern the ontology of art but embraces almost all areas of philosophical research. However, as the title of the symposium suggests, the essays presented here have to do with his work in the field of aesthetics, or rather they start from aesthetics in order to propose a unified vision of Margolis' thought.

The main goal in David Hildebrand's "Art, Artifacts, and Margolis' Recovery of Objectivity" is to define the connection between objectivity and aesthetics. According to Margolis, it is impossible to do philosophy of art without also addressing the other major philosophical issues. Hildebrand therefore analyses how Margolis connects art with the human self in order to understand that they inform and shape each other. How, then, can we improve our understanding of the relationship between these two elements? Margolis proposes the recovery of objectivity, which Hildebrand defines as a pragmatic objectivity, which must take into account the so-called intentional properties of artworks and selves. These properties are culturally relative, since "objectivity is constructed and endlessly reconstructed in the flux of history" (Margolis 1999, 13).

In their "Why Joseph Margolis has never been an Analytic Philosopher of Art", Roberta Dreon and Francesco Ragazzi exploit two fundamental cornerstones of Margolis' philosophy of art to support a continuistic and coherent view of his philosophy. These two cornerstones are: (1) the type/token model, rooted in Peirce's semiotics and pragmatism; (2) the notion of cultural emergence. Types and tokens are conceived by Margolis as dependent on each other and linked to an ineliminable historical, social, and cultural dimension, while the concept of cultural emergence leaves the confines of the philosophy of art to become the focus of a highly personal anthropological reflection. Dreon and Ragazzi aim to demonstrate that the philosophy of art's questions addressed by Margolis in the 1970s - and usually framed within the framework of analytic philosophy - should in fact be interpreted in the light of a more general pragmatist path that permeates all his writings on art. From this perspective, Dreon and Ragazzi argue that the non-reductive naturalism and historicism embraced by Margolis informed both his ontology and his philosophy of art. These two factors ultimately lead to a complete reconsideration of his analytical beginnings.

The last essay in the symposium also proposes a unified view of the American philosopher's thought. In "Margolis, Historicism, and the History of Aesthetics", Russell Pryba argues that historicism and intentionality play a central role in Margolis' philosophy, and one way to understand this argument is by analysing the way Margolis reads the history of aesthetics (and philosophy). A starting point, according to Pryba, is the text *On Aesthetics: An Unforgiving Introduction* (Margolis 2009). For Margolis, historicism does not only mean

that thinking has a history, but that it is a history. Likewise, as artifacts of contingent social history, the human selves are histories. Thought, selves, and art possess, as Hildebrand also points out, intentional properties. Thanks to these properties, the human selves and works of art do not coincide with their physical envelopes. Similarly, historical time is not reducible to physical time. Historical time is interpretable, and this interpretation is always guided by the 'best lights' of the present.

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Art, Artifacts, and Margolis' Recovery of Objectivity

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Abstract Margolis aims for a 'recovery of objectivity'. This may seem more suited to epistemologists or ethicists but Margolis saw reforming objectivity emerging from and contributing to his aesthetics and philosophy of art. My goal in this essay is to explain the connection of objectivity to aesthetics and then to offer some critical remarks which introduce an arguably richer version of objectivity, 'pragmatic objectivity'. The introductory section explores Margolis's motives for expanding aesthetics beyond its usual boundaries. Section 2 explores why artworks and selves are interdependent and artifactual, and how this prepares the ground for his recovery of objectivity. Section 3 considers Margolis' more abstract, metaphysical context for objectivity, his modified relativism. At this point, Section 4 is able to lay out his revamped objectivity. Section 5 does the majority of this paper's critical work: it explains why Margolis' view might be considered a 'pragmatic' objectivity and advances some ways in which Margolis' version might be filled in and extended. A brief conclusion identifies differences between the author's and Margolis' approach.

Keywords Margolis. Aesthetics. Philosophy of art. Objectivity. Pragmatic objectivity. Relativism. Dewey. Pragmatism.

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1 Introduction

In his 1841 essay "Art", Ralph Waldo Emerson explains that the artist's purpose is much grander than aesthetic form or expression. He writes,

There is higher work for Art than the arts....Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end. A man should find in it an outlet for his whole energy....Art should exhilarate, and throw down the walls of circumstance on every side, awakening in the beholder the same sense of universal relation and power which the work evinced in the artist, and its highest effect is to make new artists. (Emerson 2000, 280)

Emerson's ambition (for artists) is echoed in Joseph Margolis' philosophical writings about art. As he engages debates over the ontology or hermeneutics of artworks, he spins them out into wider accounts of the human condition. In this regard, he follows William James' example, pragmatically using, as Richard Shusterman noted "examples from aesthetics and art to formulate and defend his theories in other philosophical fields" (Shusterman 2011, 350).

So, in the spirit of James and Emerson, Margolis utilises art and aesthetics to project more magisterial theses – about the fallible nature of knowledge, our 'fluxive' reality, and the shifting, re-interpretable human condition. Sometimes, these wider ambitions are embedded in the job at hand – assessing the nature of a particular artwork or rejecting some critic's univocal interpretation. But if one sticks with Margolis, one can see that his targets for criticism are much more ambitious, extending out toward bivalent logics, invariant ontologies, and philosophy's indefensible penchant to isolate the aesthetic aspects of life from the wider human condition.

Margolis can be hard to follow, slippery; one moment he's discussing a specific artist or artwork (*Las Meninas* or Dante's *Commedia*, Warhol) and the next he is illuminating his point with comments on, say, bivalent logic or the self's artifactuality. One needs a handle to follow him; I suggest 'objectivity'.

Margolis aims for a 'recovery of objectivity'. This may seem more suited to epistemologists or ethicists but Margolis saw reforming objectivity emerging from and contributing to his aesthetics and philosophy of art. My goal in this essay is to explain the connection of objectivity to aesthetics and then to offer some critical remarks which introduce an arguably richer version of objectivity, 'pragmatic objectivity'.

The essay proceeds as follows. This introductory section explores Margolis's motives for expanding aesthetics beyond its usual boundaries. Section 2 explores why artworks and selves are interdependent and artifactual, and how this prepares the ground for his recovery of

objectivity. Section 3 considers Margolis' more abstract, metaphysical context for objectivity, his modified relativism. At this point, Section 4 is able to lay out his revamped objectivity. Section 5 does the majority of this paper's critical work; it explains why Margolis' view might be considered a 'pragmatic' objectivity and advances some ways in which Margolis' version might be filled in and extended. A brief conclusion sums up and identifies a difference between Margolis' approach and my own.

1.1 Expanding Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art

One motive of Margolis' work is to rebut the limits placed upon aesthetics/philosophy of art. These areas remain of subordinate importance, fascinating in their way but not comparable to, say, ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology. Margolis argues such subordination is indefensible for multiple reasons, one being that it is impossible to *do* philosophy of art without *also* engaging the other 'big' questions.

The conceptual space occupied by the philosophy of art is hardly more than a small neighborhood within the continent of human culture: it cannot be analysed separately from the rest of that huge world. (Margolis 2008, xiii)

This becomes quickly evinced by the difficulties encountered when trying to assess the ontology of artworks:

[T]o admit the ontic peculiarity of artworks and other cultural entities... is to challenge in an ineluctable way the entire western conception of objective knowledge in independent reality. (Margolis 1999, 39)

The best response to the metaphysical queerness of artworks is to stop trying to shoehorning them into exhausted and implausible ontic frameworks (which he collects as 'invariant').¹ Rather, it is better to see

how essential it is to the theory of art to fashion a conception of reality that indissolubly unites the analysis of physical nature and the analysis of human culture. (Margolis 2008, iv)

This is a big lift, he realises, but a necessary one, and he chides various theorists of art (e.g. Arthur Danto, Monroe Beardsley) for pushing fatally flawed theories rather than changing larger and deeper assumptions.

¹ On Margolis' use of 'invariantism' see, e.g., his *Historied Thought, Constructed World* (1995), Chapter 2, and throughout, as well as his *What, After All, Is a Work of Art* (1999).

We cannot say what is real in the world (including artworks) if we have no right to claim to know such matters for a fact; and we cannot know what we claim is true about the world if the world is not as we claim it is. (Margolis 2008, 87)

1.2 Meliorism and the Human Condition

A more important motive for Margolis regards the human condition. In the Preface to *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?*, Margolis connects the importance of art with its relationship to the human self.

Art is one of the principal activities by which we make our alien world familiar and interpretatively secure. (Margolis 1999, x)

Given that fact, the question organising this (and other) books is to understand the

sense in which artworks and human selves mutually inform the work of interpreting and understanding one another. (Margolis 1999, ix)

Why is this important? One might say the stakes are existential as they involve our need to answer

the threat of the overwhelming isolation of the life of reflexive consciousness (and meaning) that belongs exclusively to human persons. (ix-x)

This existential question – the quality of our very lives – becomes clearer once one learns that both art and selves are culturally fashioned ‘artifacts’, made and remade over time. Moreover, the artifacts we make (movies, histories, novels, buildings, technologies, etc.), in turn, make us. These interdependencies are complex, of course, but they also extend to more conceptual (‘meta’) levels, including those involving interpretation and evaluation.

Having argued that philosophy no longer has the burden of showing how artworks and selves are discovered (or given by reality), Margolis describes the task taking the older one’s place. Namely, to describe how and why they are mutually constitutive and reinterpretable. No longer trying to fix or prescribe what a ‘self’ or ‘artwork’ is, philosophy tries to open up richer veins of interpretation.²

² This is somewhat reminiscent of Richard Rorty’s objectives (e.g. in “Solidarity or Objectivity”) where he argued that by annulling the goal of any ultimate form of objectivity, the horizon for freedom of creativity and conversation expands, all the while strengthening the possibilities for solidarity.

1.3 Against Prescription, Against Modern and Postmodern Takes on Art

What Margolis opposes, then, are winnowing operations, programs of metaphysical *prescription* – of ultimate or ideal natures, definitions, methods, systems, logics, etc. He articulates, and proselytises against, the invariant or 'modern' standpoint which infects too much of our theoretical and everyday understandings of the world.

I take modernity to be no more and no less than the human condition: the temptation...to believe that the contingent formation of our cognitive powers do not subvert the right to be assured that we perceive the human as well as the natural world in a confirmably neutral way. (Margolis 1999, 5)

This ontic worldview – that there is a singular and ultimately real world, unchanging in fundamental ways, discoverable by reason, etc. – is not only incorrect, but dangerous. It is dangerous for pragmatic reasons – whichever version is proposed becomes an *idée fixe* that hobbles creativity or reinterpretation. Beyond pointing out those views' logical dead-ends, Margolis provides an alternative – his own version of relativism. Again, this relativism is not only more plausible, it is less *dangerous*.

Relativism is not inherently a subversive doctrine, a way of destroying the fabric of decent society. It is, rather, the upshot of a quite sober reckoning of the false pretensions of a canon that might well wreck us with its own misguided zeal. (Margolis 1999, 61)

It's important, however, to note that Margolis avoids the postmodernist/Rortyan option. Why? Because that approach, he writes,

simply abandons at a stroke the entire need for a justification of practices....But this is simply intellectual bankruptcy. For one thing, we cannot eliminate...constative discourse. For another, the practice – any practice, the practice of any community of inquirers – must have a rationale regarding how to go on to new cases not included in the paradigms learned in learning the original language or practice. Therein lies...the defect and defeat of the postmodernist maneuver. For the problem is not merely one of how to go on extending the scope of complex predicates in new circumstances but also one of how to go on giving rational or critical redirection to any sustained and disciplined inquiry. (Margolis 2001, 31)

1.4 The Recovery of Objectivity

How do we get out of this dilemma – the straitjacket of invariantism or the mirror house of postmodernism? How can we gain traction in our accounts about art, selves, and the relations between them? One important idea Margolis proposes is the recovery of 'objectivity', and the arts hold the key:

The arts, I am convinced may be shown to provide a better clue than the usual accounts of the natural sciences about how, for instance, to recover "objectivity" at the end of the century. (Margolis 1999, 3)

This would not be a replay of the older version of objectivity – which ties truth to something (e.g. reality) transcending it. Nor would it yield postmodernist excesses since

we obviously need some normative sense of the rigor of inquiry and the attribution of truth-values. Whatever is best in that sense is what we must recover as objectivity. (Margolis 1999, 58)

As will be evident in coming sections, Margolis' objectivity will serve various areas of human endeavor; our focus will be upon how to legitimate discourses about the ontology and interpretation of artworks and selves.

2 The Artifactual and Interactive Nature of Artworks and Selves

Margolis' recovery (or reconstruction) of objectivity faces historical obstacles. He cannot merely tinker with traditional objectivity, as it is encumbered by an invariantist framework he finds incoherent. And, within the network of so-called postmodernist approaches, there is little expressed desire or need for objectivity. A third way to recover objectivity must be found.

Margolis builds that third way by his analyses of three things: (a) the 'intentional' properties which help explain and identify artworks; (b) extension of those properties to human selves and their co-constitutive relationship with artifacts (such as artworks); and finally, (c) the labile and reinterpretable nature of these artifacts. These three analyses create a context in which his new objectivity makes sense, one I later argue is better construed as 'pragmatic'. Let's take a look at these analyses in turn.

2.1 'Intentional' Properties

Spending decades debating ontological and hermeneutic questions about artworks showed Margolis that a different characterisation of these artifacts was needed.

A lot of mischief lies buried in the elementary blunder of conflating the physical and "aesthetic" features of an artwork. (Margolis 1999, 106)

What, then, are we noticing when we experience an artwork? The answer, he says, is captured by what he names 'Intentional properties'.

By "Intentional" I mean "cultural"...in the straightforward sense of designating something as possessing meaning of significative or semiotic structure, in accord with the collective experience of a particular historical society. (Margolis 1999, 92)

These Intentional properties are culturally relative, they are

expressive, representational, stylistic, rhetorical, symbolic, semiotic, linguistic, traditional, institutional, and otherwise significative features. (Margolis 1999, 62)

When we perceive and grasp artworks, he explains, we do so in a way that is distinct from our encounters with common physical things:

The perception of an artwork is, first of all, the perception of an entity that cannot be identified by whatever minimal means serve to identify a physical object or "mere real thing", for the one possesses and the other lacks Intentional properties; and, second, in perceiving artworks, we do perceive them as possessing Intentional properties. (Margolis 1999, 37)

Remember that Margolis' characterisation of encounters with artifacts is not only a variation of how we would characterise normal practice; rather, it is radical advocacy for a different ontic view altogether. What's more, the epistemic approach which results also differs from those which usually accompany standard invariant accounts. Crucial to Margolis is that we see that

Intentional properties...cannot be determined criterially, algorithmically, evidentially, except in ways that are already subaltern to the consensual (not criterial) tolerance of the apt agents of the collective practices of a particular society. (Margolis 1999, 62)³

In sum, then, the traditional problem of identifying (and interpreting) artworks is mitigated by identifying a different kind of property constituting such artifacts while also explaining how typical tasks (individuation, identification, evaluation) now work within a different, relativistic framework. What's more, the relationship between the epistemic and the ontic changes; what is ontic is no longer fundamental but instead is codependent with the epistemic. (This conception of the epistemic, it should be said, erases hard divides between 'reason' and 'emotion'.)

2.2 Intentionalising

The other important aspect of Intentional properties concerns the active role of agents; we don't wait to be impinged upon by properties radically outside us, as in modern theories of vision, say. Rather,

we Intentionalise the world, not merely by piling artifact on artifact but by creating and deciphering the interpretively reflexive (the endlessly reinterpreted) history of that same undertaking. (Margolis 1999, 126)

Human beings are makers, not spectators, of their ontic environment. There is a dialectic between, as Dewey might put it, 'doing' and 'undergoing'.

2.3 Artworks and Selves

Having reclassified artworks as artifacts comprised by Intentional properties, Margolis extends such artifactuality to human selves.

Human beings...are formed and transformed in the same way artworks are, are altered by their ambient art world as well as by their technologies; thus altered, humans shape and reshape (in turn) the arts, technologies, and histories of their own culture. (Margolis 1999, 103)

³ Notice that once this is understood, standard puzzles about definition dissolve. "It's almost never the definition that matters", Margolis writes, "it's more likely to be one or another contested theory about the arts that a would-be definition serves to focus in a certain felicitous and systematic way" (Margolis 1999, 68).

The picture here is not unlike the Peircean world of signs or the Rortyan space of ongoing conversation. Meanings are in constant motion, created and recreated, amidst shifting circumstances. Selves are 'uttered' by the same processes as artworks:

we may think of selves as themselves "uttered" by the enculturing processes of their home societies. Then artworks, like sentences, may be thought of as the nominalised, relatively independent, detachable precipitates of that same process. (Margolis 1999, 126)

Selves formed in these ways are more interrelated and less atomic than in previous ontic schemas. This, too, is a lesson from Margolis' aesthetics.

We ourselves count as discrete physical entities only when counted as members of *Homo sapiens*; as encultured selves, we are linked to one another by sharing a collective culture and Intentional history in ways that appear (to us) to override biology. (Margolis 1999, 97)

What's more, the way we become selves (via this 'uttering' process) is inseparable from our interpretations and evaluations of our artworks.

All of the arts are the constructed utterances of an enabling age: we study ourselves in studying the arts, and we are thereby continually altered in the sensibilities with which we continue to do so. (Margolis 1999, 124)

For this reason, then, the analysis of artworks and of human beings is of a piece, inseparable:

The similarities between selves and artworks lies in their sharing Intentional structure, not in their material embodiment. For, of course, what they share is the unity of expression and expressive agency....No theory of the arts...is likely to be convincing if it is not a theory about what it is to be a human being or what human beings draw from the arts. (Margolis 1999, 137, 102)

2.4 Reinterpretability and Determinacy

The third element in Margolis' picture (of artworks, selves, and their interrelationship) regards their 'labile' and 'reinterpretable' nature. Unlike physical objects or those populating the invariant picture Margolis rejects, artifacts in his schema have an "existence and nature [that] are emergent in a *sui generis* way" and this means that "their objective specificities are interpretively labile in ways that are not

found anywhere else in nature". (Margolis 1999, 132) This is true not only of artworks and selves, but of our other constructions, such as history.

The meaning of the past is characteristically projected (and continually redefined) from our changing understanding of our own present. (Margolis 1999, 135)

Implied by these facts is the need for a new explanation regarding how these changing, encultured 'utterances' gain fixity or determinacy, even for a brief while – some way that utterances don't melt away in a postmodern play of signs. The answer to this challenge must involve situated and local determinacies, not ultimate ones.

I hold...that Intentional attributes are inherently open-ended and determinable and that interpretative determinacy holds provisionally, only within a historicised consensus. What holds for artworks holds for selves as well, and vice versa. (Margolis 1999, 133)

In sum, Margolis has put in place an account of artworks, selves, and the Intentional properties which characterise them. He gestures at the metaphysical context as well as the need for epistemic determinacy, albeit limited. This brings us to his relativism and what it enables, the recovery of objectivity.

3 Relativism and the Recovery of Objectivity

3.1 Setting Realism, Ontic Fixity, Aside

Among the lessons Margolis takes from the standard puzzles about artworks' ontology and interpretation is the need for a change of metaphysical framework. One simply cannot make useful (and coherent) sense of artworks within the realist/invariantist metaphysical picture.

I doubt there is any single way to understand the history of art, any more than there is a unique way to understand what it is to be a human person. In fact, the two are ultimately one and the same achievement. We ourselves, I should say, are "artifacts" of cultural history: "second-natured" selves. (Margolis 1999, 35)

Given artworks and selves share an artifactual nature, Margolis entreats us to admit the hopelessness of realist arguments. Against Aristotle's objection to relativism, for example – which argued that denying bivalence produces instant self-contradiction – Margolis counters that this argument

depends not on bivalence itself but on the modal fixity of reality... [and yet] Aristotle nowhere secures that fixity; at no point does he demonstrate that ontic fixity cannot be coherently denied. *No one has ever shown that, for it cannot be done.* (Margolis 1999, 72; emphasis in the original)

Once it is clear that there is no good reason to adopt ontic realism (presupposing "a relative fixity of nature"), it follows that other readings relying on realism (of artworks, of human selves) also fall by the wayside. There is, he writes,

no principled ground...on which to disjoin the realist reading of human selves and the realist reading of the artifacts of their world; both are culturally constituted in similar ways and subject to similar interpretive interests... [A]rt-works, like human selves, are better thought of as histories – Intentionally structured careers deployed over time as individuated entities. (Margolis 1999, 35, 90)

The lesson he draws from this is overtly pragmatic:

Whatever advantages accrue to bivalence or relativism depend entirely on our picture of the world in which they apply. Even that is a stunning gain. (Margolis 1999, 51)

3.2 Cultural Variability and Relativity

Whether one is assessing artworks over time or across cultures, there is a recurrent need to account for circumstance, viz., cultural relativity or variability. He writes,

By "cultural relativity", then, I mean no more than the pedestrian fact that the different societies have different histories, languages, customs, values, theories, and the like. (Margolis 1999, 53)

Again, this carries us beyond artworks to culture-at-large. For Margolis, any project aimed at evaluating artifacts (possessing Intentional properties) necessarily engages things with the "expressive, representational, stylistic, rhetorical, symbolic, semiotic, linguistic, traditional, institutional, and otherwise significative features of artworks" (Margolis 1999, 53, 55). The same kind of relativism applies both across cultures and within the subcultures of a complex society.⁴

⁴ Margolis writes, "What is potentially interesting about cultural relativity is that the differences noted between cultures may also obtain within them – that inter-societal differences are no different in any principled way from intrasocietal differences; there-

Regarding Margolis' larger brief against myopic presentations of relativism, I lack the space here to summarise his extensive body of work; that includes accounts of different varieties of relativism and the various ways philosophers have condensed a rich panoply of relativisms into a few pathetically indefensible versions to be incinerated and swept aside. These maneuvers indicate to Margolis that what is at stake is larger – a 'cultural site' for work to be done:

[T]he modern discussions are not so much arguments one way or another as unavoidable confirmations of the kind of cultural site at which the threat of relativism must be met... I am convinced that the ancient and modern ways of rejecting relativism depend on the same unearned conviction, namely, that whatever is truly real possesses some unchangeable structure. (Margolis 1999, 43)

3.3 Relativism Neither Dangerous Nor Lacking 'Rigor'

Relativism, as Margolis presents it, is neither dangerous (to knowledge or normativity), nor amenable to criterial or algorithmic determinations of entity identity or interpretation; moreover, it does not set itself beyond situated practices. This last point is significant because not only does it blunt realism-cum-invariantism, it blunts any postmodern appropriations which portray artifacts as so labile in nature or meaning that they would be immune to local norms or limits.

Margolis was familiar with attacks on his system as lacking 'rigor' or grounding. Margolis responded by arguing that 'rigor' is more properly understood as driven by the demands made by actual objects (artifacts, such as artworks); rigor is called for, also, because of the complete failure of philosophical aesthetics to determine any single, definitive interpretations. He writes,

the switch from bivalence to relativistic values is not a change in rigor at all but a change in what we understand to be the nature of the *objects* on which the relevant rigor is to be practiced... [T]here is no obvious way in which relying on authorial or artistic intent, textual meaning, historical ethos, genre, syntax, biography, context, rules or practices of interpretation, canons, or anything of the kind could possibly force us to accept the unique-interpretation thesis. (Margolis 1999, 58; 2008, 83; emphasis in the original)

fore, it is just as philosophically difficult to fix objective truth and knowledge within one in any one society or culture as it is between very different societies or cultures" (Margolis 1999, 54).

Indeed, if 'rigor' is the metric by which an approach might be judged, Margolis would likely argue that greater rigor is demanded of his theory. Why? Because relativism is a theory which both (a) accepts demands placed *by the objects* on the theories *and* (b) accepts the need to test theories by their applicability to a practical (and wider) world. Writing about that latter test (of application beyond art objects) Margolis writes,

Rightly perceived, these notions invite us to consider whether the rest of the real world might not also be advantageously construed in its [an artwork's] terms. I confess I am persuaded that it might, and would. In that case, the master theme is *flux*: not chaos or the denial of intelligible structure but the denial that any and all discerned structures – *de re, de dicto, de cognitione* – cannot but be invariant or necessarily inviolable, on pain of incoherence or self-contradiction. (Margolis 1999, 86; emphasis in the original)

4 Recovering Objectivity

4.1 Toward Objectivity

To briefly review, Margolis has been seeking to recover objectivity, to reconstruct it in a way that will provide useful fixities serviceable to understanding artifacts' nature and interpretations – especially artworks and selves. (Such inquiries ultimately press toward self-understanding or wisdom.) Via experiences and analyses of artworks, Margolis notices many theories foundering on mistaken ontic pictures of reality, and concomitant epistemological assumptions borne from them. His remedy is to demonstrate why such pictures are incoherent, and then propose his own account of reality (as fluxive) and truth (as relativistic). Relativism is, he argues, not only defensible, but the most reasonable and pragmatic route toward the aforementioned goals. As I'll develop in a bit, Margolis' approach is strongly 'pragmatic', though he avoids that label. I'll argue Margolis' approach would benefit from a more fulsome embrace of the adjective and his objectivity could be improved and more forthrightly entitled 'pragmatic objectivity'. I'll get to this, soon.

4.2 Objectivity Neither Rigid Nor Aimless

First, let's consider objectivity as Margolis advances it. He is seeking a via media to avoid the dogmatic inflexibility of realism and the adventitious whimsy of postmodernism, a way of 'fixing belief', as C.S. Peirce would put it. He finds that via media in virtue of the demands placed upon interpretive theories by the exigencies of practice. He writes,

[P]ractice cannot be so labile that it outruns the fluencies of memory and reasonable expectation, but it also cannot be so inflexible that experienced history is prevented from continually adjusting our critical resources to the latest in interpretive fashion. We move safely enough between these extremes, and neither science nor interpretive criticism needs anything more demanding.... Interpretation may be as local, tendentious, opportunistic, free-wheeling, and idiosyncratic as you please. Or, it may have pretensions of a connoisseur's authority. But I cannot see any reason to choose between such options. (Margolis 1999, 98)

4.3 Objectivity as Constructed Norm

The alternative to accepting either option is to insist on objectivity's constructed nature. As you'll recall, standard approaches to definition lead to failures and dead ends in understanding artworks. Margolis proposed Intentional properties as a better approach, and expanded this proposal beyond artworks to selves and the artifactual world at large. As Margolis describes the stratagem:

To admit the constructed and historicised nature of the Intentional world makes it impossible to view objectivity in cultural matters as anything but a constructed norm subject to indefinitely extended, historicised revisions. Cultural understanding is essentially a society's self-understanding...formed under the conditions of radical history by creatures who are themselves precipitates of that same process. (Margolis 2008, 94)

Significantly, Margolis' point about cultural phenomena also applies to supposedly hard distinctions in perception – e.g., between what is 'given' and what we 'take away'. Arguing for the constructed nature of such distinctions, Margolis writes,

[W]e must always distinguish what we suppose is "given" to our sensory apparatus and what is "given" phenomenologically as what we are prepared to report we see; and... [notice] that an objective account of that distinction is never more than a construction...that

fits the holist life of human agents and, inferentially, the life of creatures that cannot report what it is they see. (Margolis 2008, 32-3)

What this means, then, is that objectivity is

no more than a provisional artifact that we may alter and revise unendingly (as we see fit) in accord with whatever...we take our executive interests to be. (Margolis 1999, 6)⁵

4.4 **Objection: Constructed Objectivity Leads to a Vicious Regress**

Some comment that objectivity cannot be 'constructed' or localised in these ways because they lead to a regress. If there are no fixed standards by which to judge any particular constructed objectivity norm, it simply cannot function as a norm! Margolis sidesteps this worry by connecting it to the presumption (conscious or unconscious) that the invariantist ontic view must be correct. (This was the point he made against Aristotle, mentioned earlier). In actual life, he insists, the fact that our ideas, norms, artworks, and selves, are reconstruct-able has not posed a problem.

[O]bjectivity is constructed and endlessly reconstructed in the flux of history; that it has always been so (though misrepresented); and that, to the extent it is so, our science and art criticism (among other undertakings) have never really suffered for it. (Margolis 1999, 13)

Perhaps equally true, too, is that artworks are *especially* immune to the realist objection. Why? Because, as Dewey pointed out, art often presages, spurs, exhorts change between milieus or periods in social life; thus, it cannot be judged 'objectively' – either by eras on the way out or on the way in. Whether acting as provocateur or Cassandra, art is a midwife of cultural change and so can never be 'objectively' judged by existing standards or norms. Such artworks are liminal.

⁵ The same goes, of course, for whatever is considered the 'objectively real world', too. That notion is also a 'posit': "[S]een from the experiential and epistemic side (under that constraint), the real world is, effectively, also 'constructed' – though (as in the physical sciences) it is entirely possible (and coherent) to form a picture (within its terms) of a physical world 'independent' of our cognising conditions. That is to say, the ontic independence of the physical world is, by a benign antinomy, a posit internal to our epistemic competence" (Margolis 1999, 121).

That said, I must admit to having trouble reconciling another statement Margolis makes, namely his claim that "although physical nature is (doubtless) ontically prior to human culture, the cultural world is (in its turn) epistemically prior to the physical" (Margolis 1999, 96). I cannot square the notion that something is 'ontically prior' with his other claim, namely that the "ontic independence of the physical world" is a posit.

Finally, Margolis defends his relativistic objectivity by noting the process by which it can, and must, become 'stable' as he puts it. This occurs without needing any anchor to reality-as-such.

We cannot claim to interpret a life or artwork objectively unless we can isolate a relatively stable part of our encompassing cultural world as pertinent to that undertaking. There can be no uniquely adequate or appropriate milieu relative to which alone any life or artwork can be objectively interpreted. Whatever interpretive work is deemed objective becomes, for that reason, a salient part of the encompassing ethos from which further interpretive possibilities may be drawn and pertinently weighted. (Margolis 1999, 137)

In the course of cultural discourse, what becomes stable is taken as 'normal'. Eventually, 'normal' gives way, over time to a 'new normal' and, he writes, "suitably informed persons may claim to discern those [Intentional] properties and interpret them objectively" (Margolis 1999, 55).

Thus, on Margolis' account, whatever we now count as normal, stable, or objective has emerged due to their attributed Intentional properties (which are contingent culturally, historically, etc.). This means that the very logic appropriate to interpretation will be, in effect, indexed to relativistic objectivity norms.

[W]hat the appropriate logic should be, in servicing, say, the interpretation of the arts, will be a function of what we take the objective features of the art to be. (Margolis 1999, 45)

5 Pragmatic Objectivity

We have seen how much Margolis' objectivity varies from traditional notions. Margolis' norms are made, not found; they are relative to history, culture, and circumstance, not timeless. Objectivity ranges, defeasibly, over the properties Margolis calls Intentional. Recognising objectivity's constructed nature and inquiring into it, we find ourselves heeding the oldest philosophical directive, 'Know thyself'.

In the spirit of friendly amendment, I would like to make the case that Margolis' version of objectivity would be better termed 'pragmatic objectivity'. This is not a common phrase, however, and Margolis, as far as I can tell, does not use it.⁶

⁶ Recent philosophical works utilising and developing this specific technical term include Hildebrand 2011a; 2011b; and Frega 2014. Stephen Ward, a professor of journal-

But there are many ways in which his recovery is informed by pragmatic rationales. For example, the parameters shaping what will count as 'objectivity' are provided pragmatically, amidst what Margolis refers to using his understanding of Hegel's term *sittlich*, "the actual practices of a society of apt speakers" (Margolis 1999, 64). Such practices would of course be informed by and directed toward extant values or purposes.⁷ Moreover, truth claims would depend upon what we claim are our best first-order interests in this domain or that and a pragmatic logic (Margolis 1999, 59, 96).⁸

Regarding that pragmatic logic, he writes,

[L]ogic and metaphysics of entities is often a matter of quite local conceptual carpentry – even *bricolage*. Certainly it need have no invariantist pretensions: it merely follows the developing needs of evolving experience and tries to shape new conceptual habits that will serve us for a useful interval. (Margolis 1999, 96)

The elements of that logic will be formed by exigencies of context, dictated by "the developing needs of evolving experience" and trying "to shape new conceptual habits that will serve us for a useful interval" (Margolis 1999, 96).⁹

All of this takes place, mind you, within what he refers to as "the holist life of human agents", (Margolis 2008, 33), or what we might simply call a practical or pragmatic starting point. From that starting point (the "cognising conditions" of the *sittlich*), what amounts to an instrumentalist account of reality (including physical reality) is concocted.

Perhaps the most pragmatic element of all in Margolis' objectivity is his constant return of focus to the *process* of inquiry (rather than the criteria of truth).

ism has utilised the term extensively, beginning at least as far back as 2004, and that is where I first picked it up.

⁷ Such pragmatic forces range over more than artworks, but any technology, broadly construed. "Every "technology", Margolis write, "is, if viable, infused with the *sittlich* values of the historical society that uses it... [and those technologies' possibilities are gradually and creatively constructed] as we transform ourselves by the labor of mastering its evolving possibilities" (Margolis 1999, 116).

⁸ Margolis write, "[W]hat counts as objectivity is – ineluctably – a recent artifact of how we choose to discipline our truth-claims in any sector of inquiry. The assumption is that there is simply no way to *discover* the true norms of objectivity in any domain at all. Acceptable norms will have to be constructed as one or another disputed second-order proposal for it to what we claim are our best first-order interests in this domain or that" (Margolis 1999, 59).

⁹ Objectivity, as it pertains to logic, is a thoroughgoing, pragmatic affair: "[W]hat holds for predication holds for reference and denotation and for all linguistic powers that bear on servicing truth-claims" (Margolis 1999, 63).

How, we wonder, should we be guided in science or literary interpretation? The minimal answer is plain enough: we must begin with the socially entrenched practices of the various inquiries that we habitually pursue, shorn (if possible) of the pretensions of invariantist philosophies....[I]t is not a question of the meaning or criteria of "true" at all but of how, socially, the practices of what we call objective inquiry are first formed. (Margolis 1999, 87, 59)

5.1 Frega on Pragmatic Objectivity in Dewey and Margolis

So far, I've indicated several genuine consonances between Margolis' view of objectivity and what some call 'pragmatic objectivity'. At this point, I wish to become a bit more specific by looking at Roberto Frega's recommendation of pragmatic objectivity in aesthetics, especially as it connects to both Dewey and Margolis.

In "Pragmatic Objectivity and the Grounds of Validity of Aesthetic Judgments" (2014), Frega details how Dewey and Margolis deploy a pragmatic form of objectivity capable of justifying aesthetic judgments. Noting some deficiencies in both of their versions, he concludes with his own version which, he suggests, might supersede theirs. Frega's piece is worth a careful read; for my purposes, I need only focus on a few issues raised.

As Frega tells it, Dewey's 'pragmatic objectivity' integrates two different and opposed approaches to justifying aesthetic judgment. On the one hand, we judge artworks based on 'funded sources', that is, what we already know and have experienced. On the other hand, the impression works make upon us is also significant for judgment. We seek out art which delivers fresh, exciting, and novel experiences; whether we get it or not bears on our aesthetic judgment.

These two approaches (the 'judiciary' and the 'impressionist') are in tension; the challenge is how to combine them. Dewey accomplishes this, Frega argues, by explaining how both artists and appreciators have 'problems' to solve in their aesthetic experiences. Artists, for their part, need to solve the problem of expression (concepts, feelings, e.g.) in a way that communicates (or just connects) effectively with an audience.¹⁰

Appreciators, too, have a problem to solve, one different from the artist if nevertheless coordinate with her's. Presented with a new experience, it is often not immediately apparent how to 'take' it – how to make meaning out of it, and even how to resolve perceptual ambiguities.

¹⁰ The artist's problem, as Dewey put it, was to confront the "difficulties to be overcome in bringing about the proper reciprocal adaptation of parts" in artistic production (see Dewey 1934, 143; quoted in Frega 2014, 51).

The commonality, Frega remarks, is the experimental, problem-solving process both artist and appreciator must undergo. This means seeking a kind of objectivity rooted not in abstract reality but in concrete contingencies (time, place, history, purposes, and feelings) – a *pragmatic* objectivity. Frega writes,

The claim to objectivity of aesthetic criticism is therefore embedded in the restricted space of a controlled pluralism. (Frega 2014, 52)

Not only does this prevent funded or past resources from dominating judgment, it also delimits the impressionistic appreciator from overestimating the import of the moment. Immediate experiences with works must, Frega writes, “be tempered by its inclusion in a natural history of the form”. (Frega 2014, 53)

The overlap between Dewey’s approach and Margolis’ is clear; it includes the fact that innovation in the arts is only accomplished when the artist solves the problem of drawing upon (possibly inchoate) feelings and ideas and expressing them in novel ways conditioned by “the socio-historical and technical-expressive conditions of experience in his time” (Frega 2014, 53). Criticism which incorporates sensitivity to this tension – between the expressive act and the socio-historical-technical constraints – is pragmatically objective.

Margolis’ approach, Frega argues, adds to and expands Dewey’s pragmatic objectivity in aesthetic criticism. It’s needed because much contemporary art exceeds what Dewey’s theory could accommodate; bluntly, some art is just too wild, random, conceptual for Dewey; his theory cannot handle it – and yet it is art.

How does Margolis’ view help? Margolis rejects either ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’ approaches to criticism. The moderns seek invariance – definitions of art’s essential nature or standards for quality (or beauty) rooted in the ontically invariant (a view, we saw, he thinks is refuted on metaphysical grounds). Postmodern approaches abandon too many constraints and, so, both the art entity and standards of criticism are lost to entropy. Thus, Margolis provides a useful third option, Frega argues, by insisting (as we saw earlier) that

Objectivity is not something imposed upon criticism from outside, but a property displayed by our practices. Aesthetic criticism proves in practice its normative potential without this requiring... “any ‘a priori’ notion of objectivity”. (Frega 2014, 54)

To repeat a point made earlier, objectivity is a local affair. Like a child’s playground game, there are rules, but they are contextual to time, place, people, and purposes. They are relativistic but not in an ‘anything goes’ way. In Margolis’ version of relativism, Frega writes,

there is no need for...a meta-theory of objectivity: objectivity is something that is produced within social practices, according to the normative criteria these practices develop in the course of time. (Frega 2014, 55)

I will not pursue the details of Frega's fine article any further, here. (He goes on to offer a third option which he calls the "Dewey-Margolis thesis of interpretive objectivity".) Instead, I want to broaden the discussion to my own conception of 'pragmatic objectivity' to add or adjust elements not mentioned by either Frega or Margolis.

5.2 Hildebrand on Pragmatic Objectivity in Dewey and Margolis

At the start of this section I indicated ways in which Margolis' account is 'pragmatic'. These included how *sittlich* factors shape potential forms of objectivity, the interest-driven nature of truth claims, the embedding of objectivity in the 'holist' life of agents, and the pragmatic logic governing claims, definitions, etc. In addition to this shared ground between Dewey and Margolis, we can add their common rebuke of absolutism (i.e., realism, invariantism) or extreme relativism (i.e., postmodernism). Neither approach provides effective epistemic means for dealing with artworks, selves, or much more. Moreover, they agree that the special standpoint required by either extreme is incoherent. Margolis would surely agree with Dewey's antirealist statement that

One can only see from a certain standpoint, but this fact does not make all standpoints of equal value. A standpoint which is nowhere in particular and from which things are not seen at a special angle is an absurdity. (Dewey 1931, 14-15)

He would also have agreed with Dewey's rejection at the argument that the very existence of perspectives implied their proliferation without limit. This can be rejected on the empirical basis that, as Dewey argues, even among the most diverse perspectives "the same predicaments of life recur" (Dewey 1916, 337).

The most important core to pragmatic objectivity is overt and prominent in Dewey but lack mention or emphasis in Margolis. Margolis' view could be enhanced by folding in Deweyan ideas he tends to avoid, such as 'experience', and what I call a practical starting point. I propose these not merely because I favor them (though I do) but because the incorporation of experience provides existential traction which could advance Margolis' stated cause of reducing "the overwhelming isolation of the life of reflexive consciousness" (Margolis 1999, ix). Experience keeps theory connected to practice, and to life.

Margolis is very comfortable dealing with issues from stratospheric heights – in ‘isms’ and over vast historical sweeps. None of this compromises his arguments, necessarily, but when one reads Dewey’s careful transformation of objectivity, one sees him locate where the devil is in the details. For example, he recognises that the deployment of terms like ‘objective’ are ways of taking stands that have an impact on inquiry. If one is going to intervene with a different account of objectivity – a ‘pragmatic’ or ‘recovered’ one – then understanding the *rhetorical* context of a particular use of objectivity is paramount. One must appreciate the particulars of the actual community in which this dialogue will take place; for example, it is a much different matter to propose modifications in objectivity talk among, say, physicists than among novelists.

Appreciation of those circumstances means inquiring into the motivations behind instances of objectivity talk. People claim objectivity to serve various practical, even emotional needs. Some seek ‘the’ objective truth because they need closure (for some further practical or psychological reason); appreciating that can help modulate how any new version of objectivity is to be explained and used in that arena. Alternately, others who vehemently reject objectivity (call them old-school relativists) may have *other* practical needs – for example, to be more inclusive of diverse perspectives (again for further reasons which require inquiry).

The challenge, then, for any new conception of objectivity is to incorporate an appreciation of the perspectives and values involved in sites where ‘objectivity’ has currency. Margolis might think his inclusion of *sittlich* satisfies this challenge, and broadly it does, but I believe that proof-of-concept for his recovered objectivity would be greatly assisted by further details.

To understand why objectivity is pragmatic for Dewey we need to consider that being objective means fulfilling an obligation to conduct inquiry in a certain way. One must exemplify those epistemic habits which contribute to productive inquiry. For example, consider someone investigating an incident of theft. They want to know ‘what really happened’. This goal, to find out what ‘really happened’ is the assumption, Dewey writes, of

a valuable methodological canon [because it is] interpreted as a warning to avoid prejudice, to struggle for the greatest possible amount of objectivity and impartiality, and as an exhortation to exercise caution and skepticism in determining the authenticity of material proposed as potential data. (Dewey 1938, 236)

Again, nothing here would provoke Margolis’ disagreement. But while Margolis states that the main locus of objectivity is in practices (fallible, situated, improvisatory) Dewey does more legwork in

detailing how objectivity functions (pragmatically) to regulate the process of inquiry. Indeed, objectivity for Dewey just means valuing features of inquiry likely to resolve problematic situations:

To be "objective" in thinking is to have a certain sort of selective interest operative... One may have affection for a standpoint which gives a rich and ordered landscape rather than for one from which things are seen confusedly and meagerly. (Dewey 1931, 14-15)

The most important difference between Margolis and Dewey regarding what provides traction to objectivity is 'experience'. Margolis mentions experience in some of his accounts of objectivity, but only in a casual, passing way; it is rarely in his books' indices (unless it is under scrutiny for other reasons). But, for Dewey, experience is crucial to why objectivity can have teeth in inquiry. Let's explore briefly why.

We have seen pragmatic objectivity serves as a regulative ideal for inquiry for Dewey. But what grounds inquiry – what makes it effective? Ultimately, the test of inquiry is experience, specifically 'ordinary' or 'primary' experience. This way of checking our inquiry's results with ordinary experience is what Dewey calls the 'method of denotation'. Dewey writes,

The experiential or denotative method tells us that we must go behind the refinements and elaborations of reflective experience to the gross and compulsory things of our doings, enjoyments and sufferings – to the things that force us to labor, that satisfy needs, that surprise us with beauty, that compel obedience under penalty. (Dewey 1925, 375-6)

This is the practical starting point of Dewey's approach to philosophy; it advises that one starts with life, not words and to check one's theories and formulae against experience not more theory. The method 'warns us', writes Dewey, that all intellectual terms are the products of discrimination and classification", and that

we must, as philosophers, go back to the primitive situations of life that antecede and generate these reflective interpretations, so that we re-live former processes of interpretation in a wary manner, with eyes constantly upon the things to which they refer. (Dewey 1925, 386)

My point here is simple – that objectivity serves inquiry, and inquiry must meet the test of experience. As Peirce showed, pragmatic clarity cannot merely rely on the methods of tenacity or authority, or upon the a priori rehearsal of symbols and theories. Theories must reckon

on with something not already implied by their terms. This Dewey calls the "primacy and ultimacy of the material of ordinary experience". Such experience "provides a check or test for the conclusions of philosophic inquiry" (Dewey 1925, 26).

As Margolis goes to great lengths to point out, objectivity cannot have a 'ground' in the usual, foundational sense; it is part of our ongoing dialogue, part of the flux. Dewey the process philosopher fully agrees. But Dewey understands that in everyday life, people need to terminate inquiries, get answers, act, and move on. And so while any ground for pragmatic objectivity *cannot itself be objective* in the now-retired sense, it must find some (non-metaphysical) traction elsewhere. For Dewey, this is experience. Some object, saying that is not enough, but Dewey, James, and other pragmatists have argued that *experience is thick* (funded by the past, anticipating the future) not specious. It has concreteness, haecceity – it is not thin, transitory, fleeting. It is full of social connection, not solipsistic; it is informed by emotions and values.

Margolis avails himself of none of these experience-based resources in his recovery of objectivity. I am not sure why, though my guess would be that he found Dewey's notion too problematic for his theory to take on.¹¹ This was, in my view, a mistake on Margolis' part. Why? Because Dewey's use of experience at least provides some way of doing more than mentioning the radically empirical, phenomenological, lived dimension in which artworks, selves, and so much else subsists. It provides an additional explanatory strategy concerning how and why inquiries terminate, and what a so-called objective approach to inquiry might be purchasing. Without that account, we are thrown back upon Margolis' skeins of justification involving Intentional properties, the fluxive nature of reality, the artifactual nature of artworks and selves, and the localising force of the *sittlich* notion. None of these offend the Deweyan view, but they don't offer a sufficiently convincing answer to the question, 'Why be objective?'

6 Conclusion

It is clear that Margolis is a liberator, one who would free art from the old metaphysical assumptions and dualisms which limit our sense of ourselves. His introduction of Intentional properties, artifactuality, and relativism all work together to make a new form of objectivity plausible. A recovery of objectivity could help us recognise how

¹¹ Margolis refers, with some affection, to Dewey's account of 'experience' (in the *Logic*) as "an admittedly exotic, idiosyncratic, blunderbuss of a notion" which is, nevertheless, a solution which "Dewey positively wants" (Margolis 2014).

this important concept could be relativised and deployed locally, in what Dewey would have called 'situations'. We could come to understand that such localised appeals are always enough.¹²

I have agreed with Margolis' general aim, the need to recover objectivity, and I have pressed, with Frega, for a take on objectivity which is more pragmatic. This would be, I think, more practical and salutary in accomplishing the melioristic goals that Margolis proclaims for art and the philosophy of art.

In the end, there may be precious little difference between Margolis' view and my own. If pressed, I would say that my rejection of invariantism (as he calls it) leads not to the construction of alternate, sweeping systems (Margolis' construction of a "philosophical anthropology") but to my conscious adoption of a pragmatism as a stance or attitude. This approach seems, to me, a better way to keep theory and practice in an agile and productive tension. Still, to each his own.

12 As with Margolis, Dewey consistently championed these local, experiential checks on runaway abstractionism. For example in Dewey's "Qualitative Thought" (1930) he pushes back against idealistic logicians' insistence upon that particular judgments logically insufficient because they are not universalisable. Defending the particular judgment, Dewey writes, "enough is always enough, and the underlying quality is itself the test of the 'enough' for any particular case. All that is needed is to determine this quality by indicating the limits between which it moves and the direction of tendency of its movement" (Dewey 1930, 255).

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Why Joseph Margolis Has Never Been an Analytic Philosopher of Art

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Abstract In this paper, we support a continuistic reading of Joseph Margolis' philosophy, defending the claim that in the 1970s, Margolis tackled the issues suggested by the analytic philosophy of art from an original theoretical perspective and through conceptual tools exceeding the analytical framework. Later that perspective turned out to be a radically pragmatist one, in which explicitly tolerant realistic claims and non-reductive naturalism converged with radical historicism and contextualism. We will endorse this thesis by focusing on two important concepts appearing in Margolis' aesthetics essays from the late 1950s to the 1970s: the type-token pair and the notion of cultural emergence. On the one hand, we will emphasise Margolis' indebtedness to Peirce's first formulation of the type-token distinction, involving a strong interdependence between the two elements of the pair, as well as an anti-essentialistic, historicised, and contextualised notion of type. On the other hand, we will delve into Margolis' exploration of the concept of emergence and cultural emergence, involving a genuinely pluralistic view of ontology, as well as a non-reductive, continuistic form of naturalism. Finally, we will connect the criticism of the so-called closure of the physical world with Margolis' anti-autonomistic stance in defining artworks.

Keywords Definition of art. Ontology of art. Type-token. Cultural emergence. Joseph Margolis. Pragmatism.

Summary 1 Introduction: A Continuistic Narrative. – 2 Joseph Margolis: An Analytic Ontology of Artworks? – 2.1 The Type and Token Categories in the Semiotics of Charles S. Pierce. – 2.2 Joseph Margolis' Ontology of Artifacts: Intentionality. – 2.3 Joseph Margolis' Ontology of Artifacts: Works of Art as Tokens-of-types. – 3 On Cultural Emergence and Its Consequences. – 3.1 Emergent, Cultural, and Intentional Properties. – 3.2 Refining the Concept. – 3.3 Getting Rid of the "Causal Closure of the Artworld". – 4 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction: A Continuistic Narrative

When it comes to reconstructing the history of the so-called analytic philosophy of art, Joseph Margolis (Newark, 1924-Philadelphia, 2021) is almost invariably included in the list of authors to whom one must refer. Indeed, it is indisputable that the debate that took place within that specific philosophical current was shaped by a number of essays written by Margolis between the late 1950s and the 1970s. His article “The Identity of a Work of Art” (1959), published in *Mind*, together with “Works of Art as Physically Embodied and Culturally Emergent Entities” (1974) and “The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art” (1977), published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, proved deeply influential and provided a crucial contribution to the discussion on the definition and ontology of art.

The philosopher’s thinking appears to be analytical both in terms of the theoretical tools he employs – the analysis of ordinary language as well as the use of logical or semiotic categories – and in terms of the topics he deals with – the definition of the concept of art, the ontology of artifacts, and the role of intentionality in the constitution of the meaning of an artwork. More generally, his approach to the subject matter also appears analytical: in opposition to classical aesthetic theories, Margolis, like many of his analytic colleagues, believes that a good philosophy of art should be assigned a descriptive rather than evaluative task.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the narrative just proposed, while broadly true, is both simplistic and misleading. Indeed, it does not help us to grasp the fact that Margolis tackled the issues suggested by the analytic philosophy of art from an original theoretical perspective and through conceptual tools exceeding the analytical framework. Later that perspective turned out to be a radically pragmatist one, in which explicitly tolerant realistic claims and non-reductive naturalism converged with radical historicism and contextualism. The pragmatist tradition to which he had been exposed in the early years of his academic life (Margolis 2014) was combined with the influence of Marjorie Grene’s philosophy of biology, the so-called later Wittgenstein, and a progressive reading of Hegel, giving rise to an approach to the arts that, in our view, challenged the implicit autonomistic claims of mainstream analytical aesthetics from the very beginning – in a few words, the idea that an answer to the question of what art is, and what kind of entity an artwork is, can and must be found within the artworld and/or art, assumed to be a self-standing institution. Moreover, we will argue that Joseph Margolis embraced a form of radical historicism in his view of the arts and did away with any residue of Platonism that was still present in the analytical philosophy of art. We will defend these claims by focusing on some key conceptual tools he put in his tool-

box, more precisely: the conceptual pair token-type and his conception of cultural emergence. Consequently, the paper will be divided into two main sections, dealing with the two pivotal categories employed in Margolis' seminal essays.

The ontology of works of art will be the focus of our first inquiry into Joseph Margolis' thinking. The author's contribution to this field of research is fundamental and indisputable. Indeed, Margolis was among the first, if not the first, to define artworks in terms of types and tokens. This theory has long been discussed, employed and reworded by analytical thinkers such as Wollheim (1968), Wolterstorff (1975), Currie (1989), Davies (2004), and Levinson (1990), eventually becoming predominant in the second half of the 20th century. Its success is attributed to the fact that it allows for a comprehensive ontological taxonomy of traditional media: according to the proponents of this theory, paintings, sculptures, architectural and literary works, and music, dance, and theater performances are identified by the specific ways in which types and their respective occurrences relate to each other.

In examining Margolis' ontology of artifacts, this article pursues two goals. First, we wish to highlight how the philosopher borrows the categories type and token from Charles S. Peirce's semiotics. Margolis' use of the two categories must thus be thought of as a rethinking of Classical Pragmatism. Secondly, it is our intention to show how Margolis conceives of the notion of type in a completely different way from how it has been understood in the analytical tradition. In the philosopher's theory, the type is not identified by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions: it is rather identified as a denotatum, i.e. an abstract and historical particular.

After outlining Margolis' views regarding the ontology of artifacts, this article will focus on the notion of emergence, which is central to understanding the philosophy of art that the author worked on for more than fifty years of his career. In Margolis' late work, the concept of emergence proves crucial for developing a full-fledged continuistic naturalism, including an account of the evolution of culture out of pre-existing material conditions and the evolution of humans from non-human animals.¹ Indeed, from his earliest writings onward, Margolis defines artworks as culturally emergent entities. In this paper, we discuss the implications of the concept of emergence for Margolis' philosophy of art. Consequently, we will first focus our attention on the minimal – so to say – notion of emergent properties suggested in the famous 1974 paper, connecting it with its cognates “cultural properties” and “Intentional properties”. Then we will engage with Margolis' extensive treatment of the concept of emergence in relation to his criticism of the naturalisation program. Finally, we

¹ On the role of emergence in Margolis' naturalism, Cahoone 2021, 54-5.

will return to Margolis' characterisation of artworks as culturally emergent entities by illustrating the consequences of his use of the concept. More specifically, we will suggest that it involves the claim that the artworld cannot be considered a closed system, standing on its own theories; rather, the concept of emergence provides a decisive contribution by assuming artworks to be integral parts of the human world, i.e. to be related – through complex, multi-directional connections, including causal ones included – to other real components of the human world.

If our two critical accounts of Joseph Margolis' philosophy prove accurate, we believe we can achieve a twofold result. As the title of the essay promises, we first of all aim to demonstrate that the philosopher's whole intellectual journey should be read in the context of a broader pragmatist project: a project that clearly distinguishes him from the analytical tradition with which he has often been associated. Although we are aware that there are internal lines of development in the author's thought, we wish to present a unified interpretation of it. He considered the arts in strict connection with the peculiarities of the human world from the very beginning – we suggest – and this approach crucially shaped the answers he offered in the debate on the definition and the ontology of art. The later development of his philosophy of art as involving an anthropology of culture is, in our view, a coherent development of the claims he initially formulated as responses to the issues raised within the analytical debate on art. Secondly, we wish to describe the figure and thought of Margolis as a bridge stretched between two philosophical currents that engaged in little dialogue until recent years: Pragmatism and analytic philosophy.² We believe that this is one of the important contributions that make Margolis a thinker for the 21st century – although he was not properly searching for a dialogue but rather for good arguments and tools to explore his original philosophical interests.

2 Joseph Margolis: An Analytic Ontology of Artworks?

In order to understand the key role that Joseph Margolis' philosophy has played in the analytical debate on art, it is first necessary to reconstruct the context within which it originated and became meaningful. At the time when the philosopher began writing his first essays on the topic, academic debate seemed to have reached something of an impasse. In the 1950s, post-Wittgensteinian thinkers such as Paul Ziff (1953) and Morris Weitz (1956) had denied that the concept of art

² Amie Thomasson 2004, 91, seems to go in the same direction when she praises the inventiveness of Margolis' ontology of art.

could be defined in the traditional sense, that is, through the identification of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, to fall under the notion of “art” were disparate objects or phenomena, linked together not by the same defining characteristics but by an uneven web of resemblances. For these theorists human creativity, expressed in ever-changing forms throughout history, represented the very reason why a systematic treatment of the concept of art was to be deemed impossible. Art and its definition thus remained excluded from systematic philosophical discourse.

Acknowledging the post-Wittgenstenian thinkers’ arguments thus meant addressing the question of whether there was a strategy for keeping art within the perimeter of ontological inquiry. In many reflections subsequent to Weitz’s, the strategy that was identified consisted in avoiding the problem of defining art as a general notion by shifting the focus to the ontological nature of the artifacts identified by that notion. Recognising the impossibility or difficulty of answering the question “what is art?”, one turned toward another question that in some ways was preparatory or at least alternative to it: “what kind of entities are works of art?”.³ In short, asking this question led to the query, “are there at least necessary conditions for a certain object to be considered a work of art?” And further, “are all works of art ascribable to the same ontological category?” And more in detail, “are works of art equivalent to the physical objects with which they seem to be identified?” – and so on.

It was within this theoretical framework that Joseph Margolis began developing his own philosophy. In an essay entitled “The Identity of a Work of Art” (1959) and then in many subsequent papers, the philosopher argued, first and foremost, that every artifact is the token of a type, a concrete occurrence embodying an abstract entity.

The type-token hypothesis was predominant within the analytic philosophy of art from the 1960s to the beginning of the third millennium. Evidence of this is provided not only by the large number of authors who employed the two categories as explanatory tools (Stevenson 1957, 1958; Meager 1958; Margolis 1958, 1959; Khatchadourian 1960; Wollheim 1968; Dipert 1993; D. Davies 2004), but also by the wide time gap separating early attempts at refutation (Bachrach 1971) from more recent ones (Rohrbaugh 2003). Moreover, sections devoted to the topic appear in all the major analytic-oriented aesthetics handbooks published over the last two decades (Levinson 2003; Kivy 2004; D’Angelo 2008; Livingston 2021).

³ On the preliminary purpose given to the question about the ontology of artworks, see Wollheim 1968, §§ 1-3.

Although the important contribution that Joseph Margolis has made to the analytical debate about the ontology of artworks is undeniable, the purpose of the next pages is to show that the philosopher's thinking does not perfectly fit with the line of development of analytic philosophy. We will therefore proceed as follows. First we will describe how and for what purpose the categories of type and token were introduced in philosophy through the semiotic theory of Charles S. Peirce. Then we will illustrate the original way in which Margolis draws upon that theoretical context. The hypothesis we will put forward is that, from his early writings on art onward, the philosopher formulates a version of the type-token theory which is not only compatible with but also indebted to Peirce's pragmatist semiotics. Following the thread of our argument, we thus hope to highlight some line of continuity between the early Margolis, who is considered analytic, and the later constructivist one. In doing so, we will also show that there is a significant difference between Margolis' version of the type-token theory and the one adopted by most of his analytic colleagues.

2.1 The Type and Token Categories in the Semiotics of Charles S. Pierce

It was in 1906 that the type and token categories were first introduced into the philosophical vocabulary, when Charles S. Peirce published "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism". In this essay, which is a brief compendium of the philosopher's semiotic theories, the two categories are used to describe the nature of signs. In a sense, the use of this pair underlies the nine other ways in which a sign can be classified according to Peirce. These further modes describe the different kinds of signs not in and of themselves, but always on the basis of their relation to their reference, to the denoted object.⁴

The meaning of each sign is defined by the link between a certain type and a corresponding class of tokens. To understand what this relationship consists of, it is good to start with the class of linguistic signs, which Peirce himself seems to regard as a paradigmatic field of investigation. It is precisely from language that the philosopher draws the example through which he begins to articulate his argument:

⁴ In Peirce's own terminology, denoted objects are also called dynamical objects and are defined as "the Reality which by some means contrives to determine the Sign to its Representation" (Peirce 1906, 505).

A common mode of estimating the amount of matter in a MS. or printed book is to count the number of words. There will ordinarily be about twenty *thes* on a page, and of course they count as twenty words. In another sense of the word “word”, however, there is but one word “the” in the English language; and it is impossible that this word should lie visibly on a page or be heard in any voice, for the reason that it is not a Single thing or Single event. It does not exist; it only determines things that do exist. Such a definitely significant Form, I propose to term a *Type*. A Single event which happens once and whose identity is limited to that one happening or a Single object or thing which is in some single place at any one instant of time, such event or thing being significant only as occurring just when and where it does, such as this or that word on a single line of a single page of a single copy of a book, I will venture to call a *Token*. (Peirce 1906, 505-6)

As the example chosen by Peirce perfectly illustrates, there are two distinct yet related ways of considering each word, each linguistic sign. On the one hand, each meaningful expression can be understood in its uniqueness, as something that presents itself concretely to our senses without being repeatable on any other occasion: an inflection or volume of voice, a particular handwriting, a regional accent etc. On the other hand, the same word can be thought of as an abstract entity embodied in concrete occurrences that resemble each other yet are not identical. In this sense, therefore, each sign possesses a twofold nature: in the former case it will be called a *token*, in the latter case a *type*.

To say that every sign has a twofold nature is not simply to argue that each of them can be interpreted either as a concrete occurrence or an abstract entity. The twofold nature of signs theorised by Peirce resides, in a far more essential sense, in the co-dependent relationship that exists between a certain type and the class of tokens corresponding to it. As an abstract entity, a type will only exist when it is embodied by some physical form, perceptible by the senses; conversely, an occurrence will acquire a determinate meaning only in its relation to a uniquely identified type. This relation of co-dependence is of the utmost importance, since it has to do with the principles of economy and recursion that govern language as such: precisely because signs exist in the twofold guise of types and tokens, it is possible to express an infinite number of meanings using a limited range of words.

In Peirce’s theoretical framework, describing the relationship between type and token as co-dependent is also crucial for another reason. Indeed, co-dependence establishes an ontological asymmetry between the two terms. Tokens all possess a physical nature and thus exist in their own right, although they are formally distinct from the

objects they denote (*dynamical objects*); types, with which the occurrences are associated, are instead abstractions that are not part of the sensible world.

The abstract nature of types, however, does not lead Peirce to develop either a Platonic or a mentalist conception of these two categories. Tokens and type are neither identified with mental states nor with universal kinds, but are rather taken to denote rules based on habitual associations. In this sense, they are as real as the occurrences that embody them.

Only through the mediation of habitual association do types establish a relationship with their corresponding tokens and gain ontological weight. Such associations must be thought of, in this context, as a preexisting and acquired background that enables and informs the interpretation of each new sign. They will involve events of a different nature depending on the kind of sign subjected to interpretation. In the case of what Peirce calls indexes, for example, the habitual association is to be understood as natural, i.e. as determined by the qualitative properties of a certain object: the regular presence of smoke caused by the lighting of fires will make the former a sign of the latter. In the case of linguistic signs, the understanding of a word or phrase will be made possible by a set of social or cultural habits. As we are about to see, precisely this communitarian aspect of interpretation will also be central to Joseph Margolis' philosophy of art.

In addition to habit, which should nonetheless be understood as a kind of interpretive framework, the relationship between type and token is thus mediated by a third element that, in Peirce's semiotics, is equally constitutive of signs. This is the tone, which the philosopher defines as "an indeterminate signifying character" (Peirce 1906, 506). One example of it might be the vocal colouring that is given to an utterance while it is being delivered.⁵

The presence of this third aspect of the sign makes the identification of a token with its corresponding type extremely complex. Consider the case of irony: when it is used in speech, it is intended to give a certain utterance a meaning opposite to that which the same sentence would have in a normal context. Although identical, the two enunciations cannot be recognised as occurrences of the same type.

It is interesting to note right away that tones and their contextual status have been expunged from all philosophies of art that, inspired by Peirce's semiotics, include the categories of type and token in their toolbox. This fact is rather surprising because, in the very years in which these philosophies were being developed, tones acquired great importance in the field of the pragmatics of language:

⁵ For further exploration of Peirce's semiotic theory from the perspective of the type-token-tone triad, see Hilpinen 2012.

let us think, for example, of the notions of illocutionary force (Austin 1962) and conversational implicature (Grice 1961).

Finally, before checking how compatible Peirce's theoretical framework is with Joseph Margolis' philosophy of art, two clarifications are in order. First, the extent of the concept of linguistic sign must be considered. Although Peirce constructs the example by which he introduces type and token by using words as units, the two categories can be applied as theoretical tools far beyond this limit. After all, sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts or speeches are signs in their own right; and they are such not merely as sums of other signs, but also as vehicles of a certain overall meaning. For this reason, all semantic units – independently of their extent and complexity – share the same ontological nature: they are abstract types embodied in concrete occurrences. It is precisely this observation that will allow the categories of type and token to be employed in the ontology of literary works.

Second, it is necessary to bear in mind that Peirce's semiotics is not limited to the narrow field of language. What has been argued about linguistic signs turns out to be true, according to the philosopher, in the case of all other kinds of signs as well. *Amatriciana* pasta, for instance, can be considered both that specific dish composed of *bucatini*, *guanciale*, tomato and *pecorino* cheese that I now find on my plate (token) and the recipe that establishes the cooking of those ingredients (type). Again, the relationship between the two is characterised by co-dependence: while the appearance and taste of the dish will be determined by a set of abstract rules, those rules will have to materialise in at least one physical occurrence for the *amatriciana* pasta to exist in full.

2.2 Joseph Margolis' Ontology of Artifacts: Intentionality

Having outlined the theoretical framework from which Joseph Margolis borrows the categories of type and token, our goal in this section will be to verify to what extent the philosopher's original position is not only compatible with but also indebted to Peirce's semiotics. Our aim will be to show that, even in essays that have become canonical in the analytic philosophy of art, Margolis adopts a perspective strongly influenced by Classical Pragmatism. If our hypothesis proves true, it would therefore be necessary to interpret his theoretical trajectory in a markedly continuist sense.

A good way to introduce Margolis' conception of the categories of type and token is to examine them in relation to the rival conception in opposition to which it was first formulated. The argument advanced in the essay in which the philosopher started to use the pair, "The Identity of a Work of Art" (Margolis 1959), begins with a

critique of the theories of an analytic thinker: Charles Stevenson. The latter was the first to become aware of the possibility of applying the two categories to a specific area of aesthetics: the philosophy of literature.

In "On 'What Is a Poem?'" Stevenson (1957) proposed extending the principles of Peirce's semiotics to textual units so as to explain how the identity of literary works is individuated. Each poem, Stevenson noted, consists of a certain sequence of words that is physically manifested in a plurality of sensible expressions. Leopardi's *L'Infinito*, for instance, can be appreciated both on the page of a book and through an actor's performance, regardless of the substantial differences between one form of expression and the other. From a semiotic point of view, then, the reference to poetry lends itself to ambiguities.

Starting from this observation and following Peirce's footsteps, Stevenson concluded that what emerges in the analysis of literary works of art could only be resolved and explained in the following way: the identity of any textual artifact is identified by the relationship between a type - equivalent to the norm by which an order of succession is attributed to a set of meanings - and a class of tokens - which make that type intelligible to the senses. Thus it is again thanks to the twofold nature of signs that one can refer to the same poem in the sense of both a specific physical occurrence and the abstract entity that identifies it. Conversely, to deny that literary works are individuated by types embodied into tokens leads to an absurd conclusion: lacking the principle that traces each repetition back to the same abstract entity, one would be forced to consider each occurrence of the same verses an entirely new artifact. This would not only crowd the world with literary works that are all identical, but would contradict the way these are experienced in all societies around the world.

Stevenson has a semantic conception of the type-token relationship. Indeed, the identity between one term of the pair and the other is based on the sharing of a sequence of meanings. It is because of its purely semantic-textual nature that the philosopher's theory remains confined to the narrow sphere of literature without extending to the realm of the other arts.

It is precisely against this conception that Joseph Margolis will begin to articulate his own version of the type-token theory and, more generally, his own philosophy of art. The fallacy which Margolis (1959, 39) imputes to Stevenson is failing to recognise the peculiar trait that distinguishes a work of art from other forms of linguistic expression. Appealing only to the order of meanings does not allow us to establish any difference between a genuine poem and a simple series of words randomly lined up by a gust of wind. On the contrary, recognising a cultural expression as such always requires that a certain aesthetic design be imputed to it. In short, what Ste-

venson fails to grasp in his own theory is the intentional quality of all artistic phenomena.

Margolis also return to the topic of intentionality in a later essay, “The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art” (1977), where he once again applies the categories of type and token to the ontology of artifacts. In his article, the philosopher imagines an artist trying to attribute the property of “being a work of art” to all the objects randomly brought by the sea to the shoreline of a beach: although the imaginary artist seeks a ploy to create non-intentional artifacts, his unavoidable activity of selection will only make the purpose fruitless. The conclusion of the thought experiment thus demonstrates, by absurdity, that intentionality is a necessary condition for a work of art to be recognised as such: this is true even in the case of ready-mades, where intentionality is expressed to the lowest imaginable degree.⁶

The realisation that artistic expressions are not only signifying forms but also entities oriented by an aesthetic design is of fundamental importance in the framework of Margolis’ philosophy. This allows the philosopher to overcome both the assumption proposed by Morris Weitz that art is an unconditioned phenomenon and the semiotic perspective adopted by Charles Stevenson. By considering artworks not in terms of signifying forms but as objects invested with an aesthetic design Margolis is able, on the one hand, to give his theory an actual ontological status and, on the other, to extend the use of the categories of type and token to the philosophy of all artistic genres, not only literature. Even the identity of a piece of music, for example, can now be identified by the relationship between an abstract entity (type) and its physical occurrences (token). This is certainly a first point of contact with Peirce’s semiotics. Indeed, the concept of sign on which it is based has far more extensive boundaries than mere linguistic signs.

The notion of aesthetic design employed in Margolis’ early essays is itself very vague. It can be applied as much to works of art as to any other form of cultural production: industrial objects, advertisements, amateur or folk artifacts, and so on. This is therefore not a philosophy of art in the strict sense, but rather a philosophy of culture understood in the broadest possible terms. It does not provide conditions within which to circumscribe the totality of artistic phe-

⁶ The examples mentioned so far concern the voluntary acts of a single subject. However, it would be wrong to assume that the concept of intentionality is limited to this in Margolis’ thought. As we shall see later on in this section and in section 3.1, the philosopher identifies the notion of Intentional - written with a capital letter - with that of cultural. This broad conception of intentionality is clearly stated in the essays of his maturity, but it also seems to be present, albeit embryonically, in his writings on art from the late 1950s.

nomena, but rather offers a theoretical framework for understanding the material products of the human mind from an ontological point of view. The difficulty in isolating art from other cultural forms should not be regarded here as a weakness of the theory, but as one of its deliberate features: it reflects the way in which Margolis believes human culture operates.

According to the philosopher, the distinction between disciplines or forms of expression does not reside in any specific property but has to do exclusively with the collective activities within a social community. This assumption becomes crystal clear and fully developed in the essays that follow Margolis' so-called analytic phase. Indeed, in these writings he adopts a notion of Intentionality –written with a capital 'I' to distinguish it from the subjectivist, transcendental conception derived from Brentano's and Husserl's phenomenology– that is dependent on the activities and relations that occur in participating in the same form of life. In a paper from 2000 he writes:

Artworks characteristically possess representational, expressive, symbolic, semiotic, stylistic, genre-bound, traditional, and historic properties. I call such properties "Intentional", meaning by that to equate the Intentional and the cultural (or, the culturally meaningful -- or, intrinsically interpretable). (Margolis 2000, 112)

Although only expressed in a nutshell, the same notion of Intentionality is certainly present in the writings from the 1970s.⁷ In "The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art", Margolis defines the properties that make an artwork what it is by using almost the same words. The development of the philosopher's thought in this time frame must therefore be considered homogeneous:

Broadly speaking, those properties are what may be characterised as functional or intentional properties and include design, expressiveness, symbolism, representation, meaning, style, and the like. [...] Be that as it may, a reasonable theory of art could hold that when physical materials are worked in accord with a certain artistic craft then there emerges, culturally, an object embodied in the former that possesses certain orderly array of functional properties of the kind just mentioned. (Margolis 1977, 49)

Regarding Margolis' early writings on art, in contrast, Russell Pryba (2021) observes that the philosopher employs a rather different terminology. In the essays written in the 1950s, he argues that art-

⁷ For an account of Margolis' critique of the phenomenological notion of intentionality, see Margolis 2004.

works are such because they can be appreciated through a specific kind of perception: imaginative perception (Margolis 1958, 32; 1959, 38). Thus, it seems here that Margolis comes close to the theory of art as aesthetic experience formulated by Monroe Beardsley (1958) in the same years.

Pryba is certainly right that Margolis' philosophy undergoes considerable evolution over the course of two decades between "The Identity of a Work of Art" (1959) and "The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art" (1977). Any reference to a special perceptual mode by which art would be experienced is slowly dropped. However, one further aspect should be noted. The imaginative perception of which the philosopher speaks in his early essays is not triggered by any property or characteristic that a special class of objects would possess in and of itself. Rather, this perceptual mode, which lies somewhere between sensory perception and the imagination, is possible only on the condition that the subjects involved in the experience of an artwork – the artist and their audience – have already learned the perceptual and imaginative habits of the society in which they live. In an essay just prior to "The Identity of a Work of Art" Margolis writes about a painter's activity:

And the imagination of a culture can inspire the perception of a supervening work of art – itself sufficiently steady and clearly enough organised so that public discussion may range about it. [...] The original artist himself perceived such a work of art emerging as he applied paint to canvas, but he left only the canvas behind. The habits of perception and imagination that captured his society and himself and have proved sufficiently like those of our own society provide both for his attending and our attending to the same canvas as a work of art. (Margolis 1958, 33)

If we interpret the passage quoted above correctly, then we should admit at least two consequences. On the one hand, we should admit that, despite the substantial difference in terminology, Margolis advocates a notion of Intentionality that is immediately social and cultural even in his very early essays on art. From this point of view, it is therefore possible to draw a line of continuity that binds together the different stages in which the philosopher's thinking evolves. On the other hand, we must recognise, for the second time, the influence of Peirce's semiotics and Pragmatism on Margolis' philosophy of art. As in Peirce's case, the social sharing of a habit seems to be a necessary condition for the existence, experience, and interpretation of any artifact.

2.3 Joseph Margolis' Ontology of Artifacts: Works of Art as Tokens-of-types

The culturalist conception of the Intentional properties that characterise artifacts also affects the way in which Joseph Margolis describes the ontology of the categories of type and token. A first point that must be emphasised is the fact that the philosopher, just like Peirce, considers the two entities as interdependent. A cultural product, he observes, only exists when it is actually embodied in an occurrence that can be perceived by the senses; conversely, such an occurrence will be perceived as an artifact only when it is identified by an abstract entity, which in turn will be determined by an organised set of social habits. A musical work, for example, will not exist unless it is actually performed by someone or recorded using notation; at the same time, a series of sounds will be identified with the token of a song only if these sounds are included in a network of culturalised behaviours.

From an ontological point of view, Margolis' insistence on the co-dependent relationship between type and token fulfills a double function. First, the philosopher uses it in the context of a refutation of idealist philosophies derived from the aesthetic theories of Benedetto Croce, an author who, although only partially and poorly translated into English in the interwar period, was highly influential through the work of Robin Collingwood (1938).⁸ Whereas these theories identify the essence of an artwork in the pure imaginative act occurring in the mind of an artist, by establishing the link between type and token, Margolis asserts the need to recognise art as both a corporeal and intersubjective ensemble of phenomena. Second, the interdependence between type and token functions as a distinctive criterion for differentiating the ontology of artworks from that of other generic entities. The relationship between an artwork and its occurrences cannot be the same as the relationship between a class and its members: while we can imagine a class that counts no members, we cannot imagine an artwork that is not embodied by any occurrences. Similarly, the relationship between a work of art and its occurrences cannot be the same as that between a kind and its examples: for universal kinds exist in the atemporal dimension of eternity; instead, a work of art can always be created and destroyed at given moments in time.

As in the case of Peirce's semiotics, the co-dependent relationship that exists between a type and the corresponding tokens also deter-

⁸ Croce himself (1929) chose Collingwood as the translator of his *Aesthetica in Nuce*. On the misunderstandings that occurred in the interpretation of Croce's theses in the United States, see Simoni 1952.

mines an ontological asymmetry between the two terms. Beginning with the description of types, we shall say that Margolis identifies them with abstract particulars which have heuristic status and are embodied in physical occurrences. In "The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art", the wording is particularly clear:

It must be possible to instantiate particulars (of a certain kind or of certain kinds) as well as to instantiate universals or properties. I suggest that the term "type" -in all contexts in which the type/token ambiguity arises- signifies abstract particulars of a kind that can be instantiated. (Margolis 1977, 45)

And shortly thereafter:

Types are actual abstract particulars in the sense only that a set of actual entities may be individuated as tokens of a particular type. (1977, 47)

Lastly:

There are no types that are separable from tokens because there are no tokens except tokens-of-a-type. The very process for individuating tokens entails individuating types, that is, individuating different sets of particulars as the alternative tokens of this or that type. [...] What may mislead is this: the concept of different tokens of the same type is intended, in the arts, to accommodate the fact that the aesthetically often decisive differences among tokens of the same type (alternative performances of a sonata, for instance) need not matter as far as the individuation of the (type) work is concerned. [...] This is simply another way of saying that works of art are culturally emergent entities [...]. (1977, 49)

Types are thus real entities according to Margolis, but their reality is bound, on the one hand, to the existence of no less than one physical occurrence for each of them and, on the other hand, to the existence of a homogeneous, at least implicitly shared and historically contingent cultural context.

First, it should be noted that the notion of type as a particular contrasts with the understandings of the term adopted by most analytic philosophies of art. Wolterstorff (1975) defines these entities as normative kinds consisting of all predicates attributable to the well-formed occurrences of an artifact: these predicates are established once and for all by the author of the work. This opinion seems to be shared by Jerrold Levinson (1990, 78-82), who defines the types identifying musical works as "structures-as-indicated-by-a-composer-at-a-time". A Platonic conception of types is held by phi-

losophers of music such as Kivy (1983, 1987) and Dodd (2000, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012): both argue that musical compositions are atemporal structures that are discovered and not invented by their authors. In a similarly Platonistic perspective, Currie (1989) defines all artworks as the causal chains of action-types necessary to produce a certain concrete artifact. Finally, David Davies (2004) identifies each work of art with the chain-of-action-token that produces the artifact embodying it and from which the relevant types can be abstracted as patterns of repetition.

In short, while Margolis defines types as abstract yet real historical (because culturally individuated) particulars, many analytic philosophers identify them as sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. These conditions are mostly thought of either as lacking temporal flexibility or determined by the intentional act of a single subject.⁹ One could hardly imagine an idea more distant from the philosophical system that we have sketched so far.

Margolis also reiterates the same view of the abstract entities identifying cultural products in later essays, where he consciously and critically abandons the terminology of the type-token theory:

Sentences, artworks, selves, histories are ascribed determinate meanings, or meaningful structures, only in the way of suitable abstractions made within the shifting milieus of similar assignments made (or already made) of other such *denotata*. (Margolis 1999, 97)

Much like Peirce, also Margolis seems to conceive of artworks as individuated by culturally determined and mutable rules of association. The continuity that, at least from this point of view, ties together his early writings on art and those from later stages is substantial. It must therefore be concluded that Margolis does not gradually stop using the type-token pair because his own theory has changed too much. Rather, he does so to avoid misunderstandings: to distance himself from the uses of those categories that do not correspond to his own but are widespread among many of his contemporary analytic colleagues.

Having clarified the ontological nature of types, let us now move on to consider the nature of tokens. According to Margolis, occurrences should not be immediately identified with and reduced to the physical objects with which they also coincide from a conceptual point of view: tokens are entities logically distinguishable from mere things.

⁹ For a critique of this notion of 'type', see Rohrbaugh 2003. Rohrbaugh himself seems to hold a very similar position to that of Margolis: both define artworks as non-physical historical individuals. Since he (2003, 21) considers his own to be a metaphysical innovation but never compares it with Margolis' thinking, it would be interesting to know his opinion on the latter's philosophy of artifacts.

Evidence of the ontological difference between physical things and tokens can be directly observed by considering ready-mades, a genre of art that includes works having properties different from those of the objects with which they coincide. Take the example of *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, by Marcel Duchamp: although the work consists solely of a snow shovel, the French artist's sculpture does not enjoy the same properties as all other snow shovels.¹⁰ The artwork possesses not only an economic value, but also aesthetic and cultural attributes that are quite different from those possessed by the tool. For example, everyone will be able to say of a shovel that it is useful and sturdy, but nobody will be able to say the same thing about Duchamp's sculpture: one may say instead that it is intellectually refined and Dadaist. This happens not because some obscure metaphysical force is added to Duchamp's chosen shovel, but rather because the object, as it is, is placed in a network of relations different from and ulterior to that within which it is usually understood. It is the relationships with other objects, events, and behaviours in which the artist places the work that allow the latter to acquire new properties. These acquired characteristics always transcend the medium on which the artwork is based, although its existence always depends on the matter of which it is made.¹¹

In considering Margolis' conception of tokens, we are prompted to note, for one last time, the philosopher's closeness to Peirce's Pragmatism. As mentioned before, even in Peirce's semiotics the dynamical object is never presented in and of itself, but always through the mediation of a complex and situated system of signs, beliefs, and knowledge – what is called the “ground” in Peirce's jargon. It is from this preexisting and shared system of habitual associations that the interpretation of a certain cultural entity derives, and thus also the validity of the relationship between the type that identifies it and the embodying tokens.

Margolis points out that the relations established between already existent features of reality cause new properties to emerge from and transcend them. Such emergent properties are real, although their existence is dependent on and conditioned by matter itself. A change in the apparatus of relations existing between a given set of physical elements produces an evolution that increases the properties and functions of which matter itself is capable.

¹⁰ Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, wood and galvanised iron snow shovel, 132 × 35 cm, 1915.

¹¹ For a detailed account of how Margolis conceives of the categories of type and token and the codependent relationship existing between the two terms, see Jacquette 1986; 1994.

Types, tokens, and the relationship between the two sets, then, are not conceived by Margolis as either ideal and mental or independent; instead, they depend on the complex and ever-changing cultural background within which they are always inscribed. Given what has been said so far, we can claim that Margolis' philosophy of art has always involved a form of radical historicism which is alien to the versions of the type-token theory formulated within the analytical tradition. Compatible with the pragmatist project, the philosopher's aim has always been to find a third way between idealism and materialism that can account for the ineradicable social and historical dimensions within which works of art take on meaning and are interpretable.

Notwithstanding the lines of evolution that we have touched upon in these pages, Margolis' theoretical aim remains essentially unchanged over time. The philosophical evolution uniting the early writings on art and the later essays can thus be described as the inexhaustible attempt to explain the following definition:

Works of art are physically embodied and culturally emergent entities. (Margolis 1974, 187)

The previous paragraphs, we might say, offer some guidance for interpreting Margolis' use of the categories of type and token in light of this definition. Our purpose has been to show that, although the philosopher participated in central debates shaping the so-called analytic philosophy of art, he did so in the wake of Charles Peirce's pragmatist semiotics.

In the following pages, we instead wish to pursue a different goal. We will focus on the second part of the definition quoted above, and in particular on the notion of emergence. Through the study of this concept we will see how Margolis articulated a system of thought such that the theory of art is always proved to be dependent on a broader philosophical anthropology.

While so far we have analysed Margolis' philosophy of art from the point of view of its theoretical roots, in the next few pages we will illustrate it from the point of view of its long-term goals.

3 **On Cultural Emergence and Its Consequences**

'Emergence' is a second key concept characterising Joseph Margolis' approach to the arts throughout his entire career, from the first seminal essay "Works of Art as Physically Embodied and Culturally Emergent Entities", dating back to 1974, to his last works, *The Arts and the Definition of the Human* (2008) and *The Cultural Space of the Arts* (2010), to mention only a couple of them. The reason for this ba-

sic continuity is that Margolis assumed the peculiar properties characterising works of art and broadly cultural phenomena to provide an answer to the major ontological questions troubling the analytical philosophy of art after Morris Weitz's (1956) famous paper "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" and, more importantly, the disrupting developments of contemporary arts. As Margolis himself always argued (although with increasing emphasis over the years), the very idea of culturally emergent properties implied a more extensive enterprise than the analytical ontology of art was prepared to concede, namely a theory of the emergence and evolution of culture out of pre-existing biological resources and an account of the emergence of human beings as cultural artifacts out of primates and the fortuitous yet irreversible appearance of language.¹² Even though the concept of emergence is needed in order to develop a full-fledged form of naturalism without any reduction in Margolis' later thought (2010), we would argue that it already plays a crucial role in his analysis of the ontological peculiarities of artworks and paves the way precisely for those further developments.

In what follows, we will support a continuistic reading of Joseph Margolis' work;¹³ more specifically, we will defend the thesis that his account of cultural properties as emergent ones involved a strong challenge to what we suggest calling the "causal closure of the art-world" – namely, the claim that an ontology of artistic entities and a definition of art could be formulated and stand on its own resources.

In order to do so we will integrate Margolis' first characterisation of cultural emergent properties (§ 3.1) through his reflections on the very concept of emergence even beyond the cultural world and cultural phenomena (§ 3.2), in order to return to the issue at stake in his first paper and evaluate the consequences of this conceptual category within the philosophy of art (§ 3.3).¹⁴

3.1 Emergent, Cultural, and Intentional Properties

In his 1974 article, Margolis seems to address the issue of the ontological status of artistic entities according to the modes of approach and even the stylistic features belonging to the analytic philosophy of art. His declared purpose is to provide "a theory of the actual ontological standing of a work of art" (Margolis 1974, 187), where the first part of his definition – works of art are "physically embodied" – rep-

¹² See Margolis 2017 for a comprehensive summary of this view.

¹³ Along similar lines, see Pryba 2021.

¹⁴ For a different analysis of Margolis' characterisation of artworks in term of emergence and embodiment, see Jacquette 1986.

resents the extension, which is to say the solution to the question of identifying and fixing the reference, while the second part – works of art are “culturally emergent entities” – identifies or intensionally specifies something as a work of art. Even the characterisation of emergence is to a certain extent minimal: works of art are emergent entities because they exhibit properties that cannot be ascribed to the objects in which they are incorporated (Margolis 1974, 189; for a similar definition see Margolis 2000). Michelangelo’s *David* is an emergent entity because it expresses strength and fierceness in a sense that cannot be shared by the white marble it is made of.

However, Margolis’ statement is much more complex. On the one hand, it involves a form of pluralistic, already tolerant realism, assuming that works of art are real parts of this world, although they are not reducible to physical entities. Speaking of emergence allows him to maintain a form of consistent materialism while resisting reductionism, but the implicit issue at stake is none other than calling into question the very idea that physical entities represent the paradigm of what it means to be real, as well as the assumption that only physical things can be causally effective. These points will become explicit a few years later, when Margolis (1987) will criticise the claim about the unity of science, as we will see in the following section. On the other hand, it implies an extension of the ontological focus far beyond artistic products to any kind of cultural entity or person. For the moment, the consequences of such an ontological assimilation have not yet been completely laid out, but later it will become clear that this is the first step toward Margolis’ claim that works of arts as well as speeches and other cultural practices form the kind of cultural utterances through which animals of peculiar sort became (phylogenetically) and still become (ontogenetically) human selves through the feedback action of language and cultural practices with respect to the organic resources they are made of and the ways these resources are organised.¹⁵

For the moment, the author’s emphasis is on artworks as culturally emergent entities, namely as ones that display a basic connection with a “cultural tradition”, a “cultural context”, and “contextual assumptions” (Margolis 1974, 191-2). Margolis is not simply defending the need of an interpretation in order for something to be considered a work of art. His claim is more radical, insofar it implies that the emergent properties of an artwork cannot be perceived as such apart from a form of life quite exceeding the boundaries of ar-

15 The process of humans’ emergence from primates is conceived of as double, as noted by Pryba 2015, 229; Pihlström 2015, 101; and Hildebrand 2015, 42: in other words, according to Margolis 2015, 27, it involves both an internal *Bildung* and an external *Bildung*. The point, to us, is that these processes should not be considered as ordered in terms of premise and consequence, but as mutually constitutive Dreon 2017.

tistic theories and institutions, in contrast to Danto's and Dickie's approaches. Here we need to return to Margolis' conception of "Intentionality" and consider it in greater depth.

In his 1974 article, Margolis is also introducing the idea that artworks are "Intentional objects" (Margolis 1974, 192). In this paper, the word "Intentional" – written with a capital I – means that artworks are significant only with reference to "human society", namely a complex set of practices and the conventions of a given culture, occurring through human bodily actions, such as rising an arm to greet someone or nodding in approval. It even involves a criticism of Danto's claim that an artwork is always intentional – written in lower-case – in the sense of being about something: carpets and landscape gardens are not about anything, Margolis says polemically.¹⁶ Some years later, Margolis will provide a mature definition of Intentionality: in *The Cultural Space of the Arts*, he states that Intentional means "culturally significant and/or significative" (Margolis 2010, 49). It includes intentionality in the phenomenological sense of the term, albeit an essentially revised one, which excludes any kind of mentalism and/or internalism, because it assumes Intentionality to be a function of the cultural practices taking place among people rather than in the alleged internal theatre of one's mind.

3.2 Refining the Concept

It is over ten years later that Margolis (1986; 1987) comes to deal extensively with the concept of emergence in the field of science and beyond the sphere of cultural phenomena, even if the core issue he wants to tackle is precisely Intentional properties and their explicability within the unity of science program. In 1986, he publishes an article entitled "Emergence" in *The Philosophical Forum* and devotes a whole chapter to "Emergence and the Unity of Science" in his book *Science Without Unity*, published in 1987. Intentional or broadly cultural properties are the major novelty with respect to the physical and organic world, which could be dealt with by means of the concept of emergence when adopting a realistic yet non-reductive stance, as happens in Margolis' case. By contrast, they represent an obstacle when espousing a physicalist program in the field of natural sciences or pursuing the so-called naturalisation of epistemology in philosophy. In his chapter in the 1987 volume, Margolis engages with the po-

¹⁶ Even though it must be said that Danto would not have considered gardens and carpets to be works of art in the absence of a theory including those kinds of artifacts within the artworld. For this reason, he did not hesitate to exclude cave paintings from the realm of art (Danto 1964).

sition of Herbert Feigl, an early member of the Vienna Circle, as well as with the theories of Mario Bunge, the influential physicist and philosopher. Bunge's conception of emergence is interesting for Margolis because it seems to allow a form of emergentism that is compatible with reductionism. Against this background, Sellars, Davidson, and Putnam are also frequently mentioned by Margolis, confirming Cahoon's (2021) view that Margolis's naturalism did not come from the so-called Columbia Naturalists – from Frederik Woodbridge to Ernest Nagel and Justus Buchler – but was nourished through his engagement in the debate on the philosophy of mind. In any case, it is clear that the output of his research is not analytic at all, being committed to a form of non-reductive naturalism that includes emergence at its core and is consequently already in line with the explicit endorsement of Pragmatism he expressed in later years. This probably occurred through a complex series of influences: his strong interest in the peculiarities of cultural entities, as we have already seen; his early exposure to Pragmatism at Columbia (Margolis 2014); even his closeness to Marjorie Grene's philosophy of biology and philosophical anthropology, as proven by the warm dedication in a previous (and almost complementary) book, *Culture and Cultural Entities. Toward a New Unity of Science* (Margolis 1983).

Margolis' focus on emergence in these works lies at the heart of his criticism of the established idea that it is possible to explain nature on the basis of a unitary and all-encompassing order that can be detected scientifically. Emergent properties represent a challenge to this idea and Margolis believes that, if we honestly recognise the reality of cultural phenomena, we must abandon the whole project, opting for a more pluralistic, inclusive, and complex conception of nature. In addition to his previous works, Margolis focuses here not only on cultural phenomena, but also on biological entities and processes, being conscious that living organisms already present emerging properties that cannot be exhaustively explained in physical terms. The reason for this is that he already assumes as paradigmatic the emergence of living organisms from the inorganic world, the emergence of *Homo sapiens* from primates, and the emergence of language from physical nature – topics that will be at the centre of his later philosophical anthropology of the human being as a “natural artifact” (Margolis 2016).¹⁷

Without delving into the details of Margolis' analysis of Feigl's and Bunge's concepts of emergence, it is important to point out a couple of aspects. Firstly and in contrast to his previous, minimal definition of emergent properties, here Margolis (1987) explicitly connects the idea of emergence with the notion of system, whose emergent proper-

¹⁷ On Margolis' idea of the “artifactual self”, see Hildebrand 2021, 40-2.

ties do not appear to be analysable and/or explainable through their reduction to pre-existing components, although there is evidently a pertinent relation between the former and the latter. In a few words, emergent properties are properties that cannot be explained as the result of the mere association of the original system's components. One problem is the lack of a directly causal and/or generative link between pre-existing features and an emergent property: for example, between neurological processes and the obsessive nature of certain mental states, or between brush strokes and, say, the aggressive vividness of a Blaue Reiter painting. Another crucial problem is that, from a physicalist point of view, the notion of a system includes the idea of its closure and the denial of the so-called downward causation exercised by new properties (say, mental states or social practices) on previous components of the system (say, brain processes). For the physical reductionist, only physical events and entities are real and physical events can only have physical causes (Davidson 1970; Kim 1998): the boundaries of the realm are sharp and any physical change must be explained separately, on exclusively physical grounds. This point will prove important in order to shed light on the way in which Margolis used cultural emergence to characterise artworks some years before, as we will see in the next section.

Secondly, the divergences between the two main conceptions of emergence we have considered regard their being compatible with the physicist program, namely the claim for a unity of science based on reducing different non-primarily physical phenomena to physical explanations. While Feigl's view leaves no room for emergence within reductive naturalism, Bunge's conception of emergence is compatible with a form of reductionism because it admits a plurality of interconnected systems, while maintaining that they are hierarchically ordered. According to this view, inferior systems are open to superior ones, but their relations are linear and univocal; consequently, a weak unity of science is still guaranteed, if not strong physicalism – namely, a view of science that Margolis rejects as still conservative and dogmatic.

In addition to offering a reminder of the historicity of the very concept of 'physical' entities or processes, Joseph Margolis espouses a view of emergence involving causal connections and the efficacy of newly emergent properties with respect to already existing resources – mental events can have an impact on neurological processes, just as literary works can have a disrupting effect on the reader's habits of action and beliefs. Consequently, his conception of emergence involves the exclusion of the so-called closure of the physical world, and the denial of the view of nature as a unitary system or a hierarchically ordered system of systems, ultimately regulated by homonomic laws. Margolis emphasises that not only do broadly linguistic and cultural phenomena resist hierarchical organisation, but so do

biological systems, which appear to be complex, non-hierarchically ordered systems equal to psychological and cultural systems. Ultimately, we cannot deny that much of nature is complex and escapes a univocal logic. Margolis has no hesitation in assuming that linguistic and cultural phenomena are natural developments of previous physical and organic resources and that we do not have any need to refer to extra-natural interventions to explain them – as he will explicitly affirm when endorsing the pragmatist view of culture as continuous with nature (Margolis...). Entities and events within the cultural world are as real as those in the physical world; they are causally efficient and do not give raise to a closed system, because they cannot exist apart from cognitive and social practice and a form of life. Moreover, complex systems – both biological and cultural systems – cannot be explained in purely functional terms, i.e. independently from the material means through which they work. Certainly, even this last insight has important consequences on the view of works of art as culturally emergent entities, as we will make clear in what follow.

3.3 Getting Rid of the “Causal Closure of the Artworld”

Hence, what consequences can we derive from Margolis’ development of the concept of emergence that might be relevant for his view of the ontological status of artworks?

It is clear that his idea of emergence came to play a crucial role in his philosophical anthropology – leading him to regard humans as natural artifacts, produced through the feedback actions of language and transformed through cultural practices.¹⁸

¹⁸ See, for example, Margolis’ succinct overview of the human in his *Prologue to The Arts and the Definition of the Human. Toward a Philosophical Anthropology*: “The human is artifactual; socially constituted; historicised; enlanguaged and encultured; ‘second natured’; real only within some culture’s collective life; embodied through the cultural transformation of the infant members of *Homo sapiens*; originally or externally *gebildet*; sui generis; emergent through mastering a first language and whatever aptitudes such mastery makes possible; indissolubly hybrid, uniting biological and cultural processes and powers; capable therefore of hybrid acts or “utterances” (speaking, making, doing, creating) incarnate in the *materiae* of any part of physical nature; self-transforming or internally *gebildet* through its second-natured powers; empowered and constrained by the collective history it shares with similarly emergent creatures; capable, thus, of functioning as a self, a person, a subject, an agent, within an aggregate of similarly formed selves, that is, free and responsible, capable of causally effective (incarnate) initiatives, capable of self-reference, of reporting its inner thoughts and experience in a public way, of understanding the utterances and acts of similarly endowed selves; inherently interpretable and subject to change through being interpreted; not a natural-kind entity but a history, or an entity that has a history rather than a nature, or a nature that is no more than a history—a history determinable but not determinate. All in all, the human is a unique sort of being, you must admit, but an individuated being nevertheless: emergent in part by natural (biological) means and in part

However, it is less evident how this idea affected the ontology of art he had developed. It is precisely this aspect that we now wish to make the focus of our attention.

In addition to what has already been stated in the previous section, let us recall a useful definition of emergence provided by Margolis:

By an emergent order of reality [...] I mean any array of empirical phenomena that (i) cannot be described or explained in terms of the descriptive and explanatory concepts deemed adequate for whatever more basic level or order of nature or reality the order or level in question is said to have emerged from, and (ii) is causally implicated and cognitively accessible in the same “world” in which the putatively more basic order or level is identified. (Margolis 1995, 257)¹⁹

We are now in a position to clarify the details of Margolis’ thesis that works of art are culturally emergent entities.

First of all, works of art are real, although their properties – say, the meaning of a psalm within a religious ceremony – cannot be causally explained by simply referring to the material conditions on which they rely. Second, works of art (can) exert a causal action on the components of the material world from which they have emerged: for example, reciting a psalm in a community of believers can have a calming effect on bystanders, it can strengthen mutual bonds or excite more suggestible individuals. This means assuming a complex view of causality, as constituted by multiple concomitant factors, and positing a feedback action by cultural practices on socio-cultural features – e.g. reinforcing bonds between believers – as well as on physiological processes – e.g. relaxing muscles and producing endorphins. Thirdly, the alleged “basic order of nature”, “the first level of reality”, or the “zero-system” from which the emergent properties of artworks emerge is not a merely physical world, but a *Lebenswelt* consisting of the various forms of human life: a complex system of relations and systems that can be locally ordered and distinguished, but are not hierarchically ordered, as they frequently overlap and are mutually connected. Consequently (and fourthly), artworks cannot be taken to constitute an autonomous, self-standing realm or system. For example, Warhol’s *Brillo Box* is not supervenient upon a physical level of merely physical entities by virtue of a theory of art and the attribution of the “is” of artistic identification (Danto 1964). Indeed,

by artifactual or cultural transformation—possibly, then, a conceptual scandal or even the living refutation of many a convention of canonical philosophy” (Margolis 2008, 19).

19 I am drawing this quotation from Sami Pihlström’s essay, an extensive section of which is devoted to Joe Margolis’ conception of emergence (Pihlström 2015).

even the formulation of artistic theories belongs to a specific cultural context and tradition – a secularised context where many efforts have been made in relation to a wooden Madonna to isolate the work of art from the worship object, as well as from the handcrafted artifact (Shiner 2003). Although in late modern times and within Western culture we have witnessed a process of partial artistic autonomisation, the artworld is far from being a closed, self-standing system – it cannot stand “to the real world in something like the relationship in which the City of God stands to the Earthly City” (Danto 1964, 582). On the contrary, it “is causally implicated and cognitively accessible in the same ‘world’ in which the putatively more basic order or level is identified” (Margolis 1995, 257), as Margolis states in a passage already quoted.²⁰

Finally, the means by which artworks are embodied are not indifferent and merely functional, which is to say that they cannot be replaced with other means without making any difference: similarly to biological systems, works of art are complex systems where the ways in which a specific function is realised contribute to determining the function itself – to put it with the Pragmatists, means contribute to making ends (Dewey ..., Hickman...). To take an extreme example, Kosuth’s famous *One and Three Chairs* claims to show a chair independently from how we grasp it (through the direct perception of the object itself, through a picture of the object, or by means of a definition), yet in this case too the peculiar assemblage in which the work of art is embodied enters into its very constitution and is decisive in shaping and fixing the artwork’s identity and capacity to have an impact on the surroundings.

4 Conclusions

Between the late 1950s and the 1970s, Joseph Margolis substantially contributed to debates that were to prove crucial for the development of the analytical philosophy of art. His ontology of artifacts was commented upon and reworked by authors such as Wollheim (1968)

20 For a more extensive treatment of the Danto-Margolis debate, see Pryba 2015. Pryba interprets Joseph Margolis’ critical claim that Danto’s theory prevents him from recognising the reality of paintings according to his conception of perception. The problem for Margolis is that Danto considers the perception of artworks to consist of purely sensory, organic or biological processes, immune to historical change, and thus denies perception any role when it comes to tracing a distinction between works of art and ordinary things. In Margolis’ view, Danto is incapable of seeing that human perception is permeated by cultural concepts, i.e. he fails to appreciate that the cultural features produced by human practices and societies affect perception itself – that they exercise a kind of downward causation on previously existent forms of animal perception, to put it in emergentist terms.

and Wolterstorff (1975), among many others belonging to that specific philosophical tradition. However, our argument is that the philosopher's theoretical trajectory should be interpreted in a different way. Indeed, the pragmatist perspective that permeates Margolis' more mature essays can also be identified – albeit in a less articulate form – in his early writings on art.

To prove our point, we set out in two opposite and complementary directions. On the one hand, we studied the way Margolis introduced the categories of type and token into his own ontology of art. In this way, we retrospectively highlighted the filiation between the latter and Charles Peirce's semiotics. On the other hand, we retraced the way in which the concept of emergence employed in Margolis' definition of artifacts was gradually clarified and specified over the years, until it became the pivot of a broader philosophical anthropology.

From an ontological point of view, from the late 1950s onward Margolis defined all artifacts as tokens of types. In doing so, he adopted an understanding of the two categories that in many respects mirrored Peirce's. Like the latter, Margolis holds that tokens are linked to their types by a relationship of inescapable co-dependence: whereas a type cannot exist unless it is embodied in at least one physical object or event, a token cannot be identified as such unless it is recognizable as the occurrence of an abstract entity. In addition to this, there are two further elements of similarity. Firstly, Margolis and Peirce define types as abstract particulars: they are real individual entities, although they are dependent on the matter in which they are embodied. Secondly, both philosophers believe that tokens are not simply equivalent to physical objects: the two members of the categorical pair are only identified as such if they occur within the framework of at least implicitly shared and historically determined behaviours and habits.

Insofar as Margolis understands the type and token pair in this sense, his theoretical system differs in at least two respects from those of his analytical colleagues who employ the same categories. A first difference concerns the nature of the types that identify each artifact. In all analytical ontologies, these abstract entities are thought of as sets of conditions or attributes that identify specific classes of objects or events. Consequently, works of art are conceived of as properties possessed by certain physical phenomena. To this attributive model Margolis opposes the idea that each artifact is the token of an abstract particular to which different properties can be attributed depending on the cultural contexts within which its occurrences are produced. A second difference concerns the way in which intentionality is acknowledged to be a constitutive characteristic of all works of art. Whereas in Margolis' understanding the notion of Intentional coincides with that of cultural, and thus has boundaries located in the sphere of the collective, in analytical philosophies of art the intentional properties of an artifact are either determined by the

action of a single subject oriented by a certain theory or institution, or are properties of thought.

These two differences combined produce considerable effects from an ontological point of view. Regardless of the specific cases, analytical philosophies of art do not allow for the recognition of temporal flexibility as an inherent characteristic of all artifacts. Theories such as Wolterstorff's (1975) assign individual authors or artists the responsibility of defining the essential properties of their works; Platonistic theories such as Currie's (1989) situate the principle of individuation of each artifact outside of time. By contrast, by conceiving of types as culturally determined, Margolis' ontology of artifacts is characterised by a historicism that is as substantial as it is radical.

Considering the role that the categories of type and token play in Margolis' philosophy of art has allowed us to show that a pragmatist perspective is present in it from the very beginning. It has also allowed us to grasp a first sense in which we can understand the philosopher's definition of artifacts as physically embedded and culturally emergent entities.

The concept of emergency was at the core of our second inquiry. Margolis used it consistently and in an increasingly specific way from the 1970s to the end of his career. In his early aesthetic writings, the notion is used to highlight the fact that works of art exhibit Intentional properties that cannot be ascribed to the mere physical objects in which they are embodied. In later writings, the scope of the term expands to become the pivot of a genuine philosophical anthropology and ontological theory. In this sense, the emergence of artifactual properties from objects is taken as a model to explain other events, such as the emergence of mind from brain mass and, more generally, of life from matter.

Within the framework of his own ontology, Margolis uses the notion of emergence to describe a system in which properties appear that are connected to matter by relevant relations, yet cannot be explained in terms of the mere association of pre-existing features and involve novel forms of organisation. Since the theory rules out the presence of any additional metaphysical forces beyond the material world, we might say that the philosopher embraces a position of non-reductive naturalism. In this article, we have tried to show how Margolis' model differs from other, similar forms of naturalism.

The main difference between Margolis' theory and, say, Donald Davidson's anomalous monism concerns the organisation of causal relations. Physicalist naturalism assumes that lower-level events can cause higher-level events, but not the other way round. This implies the closure of any natural system. In contrast, Joseph Margolis argued with increasing conviction that causal relationships between higher and lower levels are possible. In the context of his philosophy of mind, for example, the philosopher held that there exist not only

causal relationships from the physical realm to the mental one, but also feedback effects in the opposite direction. In this framework, the concept of emergence can be associated with that of a complex system in which each level may be causally relevant for all others.

This difference in the way naturalism is understood entails a further difference in the way the scientific project as a whole is conceived. Physicalist philosophies advocate the unity of the sciences based on the possibility of explaining non-primarily physical phenomena or at least identifying them as purely physical events. Margolis' emergentism instead implies a denial of the idea that nature is a system of systems hierarchically regulated by homonomic laws.

As we have tried to show, this view of nature and science also has important implications for Margolis' understanding of artifacts. Firstly, consistently with his own way of explaining causal relations, the philosopher believes that cultural objects can have an effect on components of the material world. Conversely, the lowest level of reality from which the properties that characterise artworks emerge does not coincide with causal chains located in the physical realm, but rather with a form of life already constituted by a complex web of relations between different levels of reality – the material, the mental, and the cultural. Works of art, although dependent on physical objects, are therefore real in their own right.

An investigation of the general ontology proposed by Margolis finally led us to point out a substantial difference in the way the philosopher solves the problem of defining art compared to his analytical counterparts. Indeed, authors such as Danto and Dickie seem to suggest that art too is a closed system, fully definable by referring to elements that are allegedly internal to it and constitutive of it, such as art theories or institutions. Margolis, by contrast, believes that this is not the case and definitely rejects the idea of the autonomy of the realm of art, the artworld, or art institutions. The premise that no system is actually closed, but that all systems are mutually linked within a historical flux, is coherent with the philosopher's claim that a definition of art and its objects can only be given in Intentional terms, that is, by participating in a form of life whose boundaries and peculiarities are mutable over time and continuously made to fit practical purposes.

Non-reductive naturalism and historicism are two perspectives that Margolis set in an ever-closer alliance, in both his ontology and his philosophy of art. In this article, we have attempted to highlight how the seeds of this alliance were sown by the philosopher in his early writings on art and then sprouted into comprehensive ontological and epistemological theories. If our argument is correct, we will then have to abandon the idea that there was an analytical Margolis, who only later approached Pragmatism. Instead, the trajectory of his thought will have to be envisaged as a line of development that is as continuous as it is coherent.

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Margolis, Historicism, and the History of Aesthetics

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Abstract This paper examines the manner in which Joseph Margolis's philosophical commitment to historicism informed his reading of the history of philosophy focusing specifically on his engagement with the history of aesthetics. For Margolis, a historicised history of philosophy involves offering a reading of the great thinkers of the past with an eye towards marking their best contributions to the philosophical problems of the present. As such, the task of the history of philosophy is not to solely construct a narrative of the successive views of philosophers of the past, nor to merely accurately reconstruct what philosophers thought, but rather to recover the thought of those philosopher as a means to construct of own best philosophical discoveries.

Keywords Hegel. Historicism. History of aesthetics. Intentionality. Joseph Margolis. Pragmatism. Relativism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Historicism as a Methodological Constraint on Doing the History of Philosophy. – 3 What, After All, is Margolisian Historicism?. – 4 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

In some of the memorial notices for Joseph Margolis that began to appear after his passing in June 2021 it was common theme to note that, although Margolis had written on nearly every area of philosophical debate over the course of his long and productive career, he was best known for his contributions in the philosophy of art. In aesthetics Margolis notably defended a robust relativism as the only adequate theory of interpretation suitable to the variances of the cultural world. This makes him, perhaps, the ablest defender of a coherent relativism in the entire history of Western philosophy. In support of his relativistic model of interpretation, Margolis developed a non-reductive ontology of art grounded in his guiding insight philosophical insight regarding human personhood. On this account, a human person is a hybrid entity, artificialised in the very same way as cultural products which are functions of our utterances, and thereby susceptible to the same strictures of (relativistic) interpretation. Of course, all this is true by way of summary of Joseph Margolis's towering philosophical accomplishments in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Yet, perhaps due to the originality of his own thought, much less explicit attention has been paid to the ways in which Margolis engaged with the history of philosophy. Be that as it may, Margolis's writing is replete with sustained analysis of the canonical figures in the history of Western philosophy. These historical discussions often aim to animate the contemporary philosophical views he favours or disfavours by reconstructing current theoretical commitments in terms of the contingent historical trajectories of philosophical thought which have led to them. As such, it becomes immediately clear from almost any page in his extensive oeuvre that Margolis's knowledge of the history of Western philosophy was immense. And while he did not *explicitly* take up the history of philosophy or its historiography on its own accord as one of his main areas of philosophical focus, it is essential in order to fully grasp his own complex philosophical commitments to view them as correctives for the theoretical inadequacies of the towering figures of the Canon for the conceptual resources required for our own age. This, at any rate, is the spirit in which Margolis often offered his own philosophical musings. Therefore, it is difficult to fully understand Margolis's mature pragmatism and all its entailments in more local philosophical debates in the philosophy of art unless one understands them as emerging from Margolis's reading of the various dead ends (as he would have it) at which Western philosophy has arrived over the preceding 2,500 years. For example, the earliest Platonic rejection of relativism is a wrong turn from which, in Margolis's point of view, philosophy has still never fully recovered (despite his own very best efforts).

Due to his overarching commitment to historicism, Margolis's own readings of the history of philosophy (and subsequently his grappling with the canonical figures of the Western philosophical tradition)¹ are more often a reflection of what, due to their own location in the history of philosophy, those figures necessarily lacked in terms of an adequate philosophy of the human, the arts, the sciences and entire domain of culture. At least from Margolis's particular, likewise historicised, philosophical vantage.

In order to get at some of the ways in which Margolis's historicism can be gleaned from his engagement with the history of philosophy, in this paper I shall primarily examine parts of *On Aesthetics: An Unforgiving Introduction*. *On Aesthetics* is a curious text in that it is ostensibly intended as an introduction to the history of Western philosophical aesthetics suitable for use in an undergraduate philosophy course. In that regard, I suggest, the text is unsuccessful. As might also be reasonably asserted of William James's *Some Problems of Philosophy*, the purpose of a supposedly introductory text can be seen as in tension with the elaboration of one's own philosophical system, especially if an introductory text is meant to be a statement of the canonical problems and figures in the history of a given subfield of philosophy. Thus, although *On Aesthetics* would likely leave an undergraduate mostly uninformed about the history and development of philosophical aesthetics, a careful reader already in possession of a general understanding of the trajectory of philosophical aesthetics from Aristotle to Kant and Hegel could leave an encounter with the book understanding something about Margolis's own aesthetics. Especially as it pertains to the failure of those earlier thinkers to provide sufficient philosophical grounds to account for their purported subject matter – the arts.

In what follows, I shall discuss some of the more interesting parts of *On Aesthetics* from the point of view of trying to develop, from that text, a sense of how Margolis reads the history of philosophy with a further eye towards picking out the often-well-grounded complaints that Margolis levels against earlier aesthetic theories. Next, I shall sketch Margolis's formulation of historicism to show how historicism informs his treatment of figures in the history of philosophy. Finally, I shall provisionally suggest some ways in which reading Margolis reading the history of philosophy (here focused narrowly on the history of aesthetics) is helpful in unpacking his guiding philosophical insight – the single idea that if one were to reject would amount to the rejection of Margolis's entire philosophical project – namely, his

¹ In a late, semi-autobiographical piece, Margolis confessed his regret that he possessed only the faintest familiarity with the rich philosophical traditions of Asia (Margolis 2021, 2).

theory of the human person. Although it will lie outside the scope of this modest paper to fully explicate the myriad ways in which Margolis's theory of personhood informs his philosophy as a whole, it is hoped that the suggestions offered here will point the way towards a more sustained investigation into how Margolis used the history of philosophy in the articulation of his own thought, and as a consequence, how to best understand Margolis's own place in that history.

2 **Historicism as a Methodological Constraint on Doing the History of Philosophy**

As Joseph Margolis is widely associated within the field of philosophical aesthetics with the defence of a relativistic model of interpretation, a philosopher opposed to relativism in the interpretation of the history of philosophy (that is one convinced that there is a single correct reading of the meaning and contributions of past philosophers) might reasonably be concerned about the ways in which that relativism would inform Margolis's reading and interpretations of said history. It is important to note here at the outset however that Margolis's relativism was never of the 'anything goes' variety as his theory of interpretation is primarily focused on articulating the conditions which would make a statement *apt* (rather than bivalently true or false) to the object of interpretation (whether it be an artwork, a philosophical text, the actions of a human person, or our collective histories). This worry might especially obtain for "universalist" philosophers because, as Margolis has noted, in his paper "Historicism, Universalism, and the Threat of Relativism" historicism entails relativism and pluralism (even though the opposite entailments do not hold). That is, as Margolis puts it, "within an historicised or praxicalised inquiry, the loss of universalism must doom us also to skepticism and relativism." However, this fear, in Margolis's view, will ultimately be philosophical insignificant because, he continues, "if relativism and pluralism need neither be incoherently formulated nor threaten whatever general cognitive regularities the practices of science can otherwise legitimately claim, there is no additional need to resist (or to fear) the implications of adopting those doctrines" (Margolis 1984, 317). As such, since for Margolis historicism entails relativism, developing a clear understanding of what is meant by that former doctrine is essential in understanding his broader defence of relativism and pluralism. Although this paper will not be able to fully articulate and defend the complete extent of the relationship between these two aspects of Margolis's thought, it shall provide a necessary pro-paedeutic for that larger study by examining some of the salient details of Margolis's theory of historicism. One constructive method of coming to an understanding of how historicism informs Margolis's

philosophy is to examine the ways in which it is made manifest in his treatment of thinkers from the history of philosophy. In that regard a particularly fruitful text, because it is meant in part as a historical introduction to philosophical aesthetics (whether or not it fully succeeds in that task), is Margolis's book *On Aesthetics*.

Although Margolis does not explicitly address questions of methodology in doing the history of philosophy in detail in *On Aesthetics*, it is possible to discern some of his commitments on the proper uses of the history of philosophy from that text. First, considering the subtitle of that text – an *unforgiving* introduction – it is clear that Margolis is not interested in presenting a purely 'objective' account of the meaning of the various historical philosophers he discusses since, on his view, no such accounting would, strictly speaking, be possible. A commitment to historicism has decided implications for one's further views of history (and vice versa) and how to do the history of philosophy. One such statement of Margolis's commitment to a historicised method of doing the history of philosophy can be found in the brief preface of *On Aesthetics*.

So the arts, and the sciences as well, are, once again, profoundly historied and (I daresay) only thus rightly understood. There's a paradox there that will prove to be benign, because the seeming claim in favour of historicity is not itself a necessary or changeless of universalist doctrine. It's no more than a *faute de mieux* proposal regarding the whole of our humanly intelligible world. The analysis that follows draws its entire rationale from the double conviction that we shall understand aesthetics best (and ourselves and philosophy in the bargain) if we trace their careers from their historical origins and, continuingly, in historicised terms. That, apparently, is a heterodox idea – except when actually stated: we proceed by constructing our discoveries. (Margolis 2009, vii)

There is much that is instructive in this passage in understanding how Margolis approached his treatment of the history of philosophy in, at least nominally, a historical introduction to philosophical aesthetics. First, the best possible understanding of the history of aesthetics (and philosophy) is one that takes as its methodological starting point a commitment to historicism. I shall explore the details of Margolis's historicism in more detail in what follows, but for now it can be noted that for Margolis historicism does not merely mean that thinking has a history, or that it is bounded by a particular historical context of horizon, but more strongly that thinking is a history. As Joanne Waugh has noted in commenting on Margolis's thought "the history of philosophy is, in a fundamental sense, the history of thinking that is a history" (Waugh 2005, 579). Further, Margolis makes a distinction in the passage above between tracing

the historical origins of aesthetics in order to best understand it and doing this historical work in historicised terms. It is important not to conflate these closely related points. For Margolis, a commitment to historicism is not exhausted merely by asserting that aesthetics must be understood through an examination of its history. Later in *On Aesthetics* Margolis states that “the historicised conception of history” is to see “history as more than a temporally deployed story” (2009, 57). So, it is not enough to provide a historicised history of aesthetics to construct a cohesive narrative that presents aesthetics as having a story that can be told convincingly as the recounting of who thought what and when. What more might be required still remains to be seen. Secondly, returning now to the long passage quoted above, the historicised understanding of the history of philosophy has to be understood merely as (in one of Margolis’s favourite expressions *faute de mieux*) being preferable only because of the absence of anything better. This argumentative strategy is central to Margolis’s treatment of the history of philosophy – his attempts to show the inadequacies of the classical aesthetic theories of the Ancient and Modern periods in philosophy (periodisation, of course, being itself a central question in the historiography of philosophy) are intended to show that there really is an absence of anything better (than his own preferred theoretical gambits) in the history of aesthetics that could offer a plausible explanation of the complexities of the cultural, that is the human, world. So even if historicity is itself merely a provisional and fallible proposal, until something theoretically better comes along (if it ever does), it still must be conceived in a way, as must relativism, that avoids the obvious self-refuting paradox. Especially if that is taken as meaning that *no* coherent version of historicism or relativism could be constructed. This is why Margolis, at least as early as 1984’s “Historicism, Universalism, and the Threat of Relativism” quoted above, claims that historicity is itself never presented as an invariant, universalist philosophical thesis (as this would be a self-refuting version of that doctrine). This is what, in Margolis’s estimation, makes his defence of these views heterodox – but only against the backdrop of the conventions of the broader context of the dominant world of late Anglo-Analytic philosophy in which he worked, thought, and wrote. This context, of course, is also only properly understood if it is taken as itself a temporal part of the historicised history of philosophy!

There is a further instructive passage from *On Aesthetics* about how to read the history of philosophy that will be useful to explore before progressing to a fuller account of Margolis’s meaning of historicism itself. In the context of providing a tally of his own commit-

ments for an adequate metaphysics of art² as a means to robustly account for historicity and the reality of culture (against, for example, figures like Arthur Danto who, Margolis argues, cannot account for either given the theoretical commitments of his admittedly better-known philosophy of art)³ Margolis suggests the following as a way to reconcile his account with Hegel.

I take them to cohere as the best way to read Hegel's contribution even if it goes against his own convictions. I am not sure what Hegel's best conviction is; I'm not sure anyone knows for certain. But I'm convinced we must read the great philosophers with a scruple that does not flinch at "correcting" them for the sake of their "own best use" – always, for trivial reasons, said to accord with our own best lights. There's room, then, for the correction of our corrections. It will always be thus; the "best" views are always designated in the present. (Margolis 2009, 135)

An uncharitable critic might accuse Margolis of committing the fallacy of claiming that the entire history of philosophy (aesthetics) leads to his own thought. However, a close reading of this passage belies such an interpretation. Rather, Margolis is suggesting a strong com-

² Margolis is perhaps the greatest list-maker in the recent history of Western philosophy. The list referred to here and in the block quote below consists of the following claims comprising Margolis's "meta-metaphysical" generalisations required for an adequate metaphysics of art:

1. Metaphysics should be treated as a construction or proposal without invoking any claims to cognitive privilege or universality.
2. Any viable metaphysics things in the cultural world are to be grouped together on the basis of their sharing "Intentional" properties which cannot be rightly ascribed to mere material objects.
3. Intentional things are distinctive in that they instantiate Intentional properties and emerge from the world of mere material things.
4. 1-3 preclude any reduction of the Intentional (cultural) world to the things of the (merely) material world (contra Danto).
5. The emergence of the Intentional world likewise implicates the penetration of the material world by enculturating powers (primarily for Margolis the process of language acquisition)
6. Intentional objects and properties are ontological hybrids which are effected by the primary transformation of members of *Homo Sapiens* to encultured persons or selves (a process which Margolis captures by his use of the term *Bildung*)
7. Intentional properties are determinable but not determinate (in the way that physical properties are) such that the logic of interpretation of Intentional properties is consistent with historicism and relativism (Margolis 2009, 133-5).

Here, in this footnote, are almost the entirety of Margolis's major philosophical commitments. Keep in mind that as presented in the original context they were merely employed as a way in which to frame a suggestion about how to read Hegel's own philosophical contribution!

³ For a fuller accounting of Margolis's argument with Danto, a recurring theme of *On Aesthetics* see Pryba 2015.

mitment to fallibilism in our “best” readings of figures from the history of philosophy. So, we must read the great philosophers without hesitating to “correct” them where their thinking might be fruitfully viewed as contributing to our own best philosophical intuitions, even when this reading might otherwise count as going against that philosopher’s own convictions when circumscribed within their own understanding of their own place within the history of philosophy (as they understood it). Of course, thinkers from the past were bounded, just as we are, by their own historical horizon. This means that we likewise cannot determine what contributions we may make towards the best philosophical convictions of the future when we are viewed from that future vantage. But, since as Margolis asserts “the ‘best’ views are always designated in the present” our best reading of the history of philosophy will be supplanted by the reading of whatever future generations of philosophers take to be our best contributions to *their* conception of philosophical problems whether or not that reading would be consistent with the way that we might currently conceive of our strongest philosophical convictions. Margolis, if we take him at his word, would have no problem if the philosophy of the future should deign to read him as he suggests we should read Hegel.

The suggestion that we read the history of philosophy with an eye towards its best uses for our own philosophical projects, despite what we might otherwise consider to be that philosopher’s own historically grounded philosophical convictions, might bring to mind Richard Rorty’s own postmodern suggestions as to how to use the history of philosophy. For Rorty, any “strong” philosopher can be interpreted in such a way as to make them an ally of contemporary (postmodern) philosophical projects. Rorty’s uses of Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Heidegger come to mind as illustrations of the kind of interpretive freedom that Rorty advocates (Rorty 1979). For Margolis, however, there is a significant difference between Rorty’s and his own procedures in reading and employing the history of philosophy for contemporary philosophical usages. For Margolis, although we must understand the contributions of the great thinkers from the history of philosophy in a historicised way, and this means that their best philosophical insights are to be considered against the most promising views of the present, this does not amount to a “presentism” in the history of philosophy or a revisionist historical approach writ large. Margolis’s problem with Rorty’s looser interpretative strictures is that “too many rightly admired contributions were too easily dismissed by the barest appeal to Rorty’s notion of philosophical work, so that his advice (and personal example) proved utterly ill-advised. It produced chaos and bad philosophy rather than the clean surgery intended” (Margolis 2009, 2). And yet, Margolis does not hesitate to assert on the next page that Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, if taken as a guide for philosophical aesthetics, would be “to render our own views as nearly

indefensible and irrelevant as is humanly possible" (2009, 3). There is perhaps no more forceful example of what Margolis intends by his scruple to read the history of aesthetics (philosophy) by framing that reading with our own best understanding of what that discipline requires. This is one suggestion for how to conceive of reading the history of philosophy philosophically rather than merely historically. If one were to follow Kant's inquiries in aesthetics merely because it is a "canonical" text in field, then one would have learned nothing from the history of philosophy about why Kant's own inquiries in that domain are doomed to fail as a foundation for what an adequate aesthetics, when viewed by our own 'best lights,' actually requires.

With all that kept in mind, it will be helpful to return to Margolis's comments about the best reading of Hegel's contribution quoted above because, despite his protestations to the opposite, Margolis does suggest what Hegel's best conviction, and thereby contribution, to the history of philosophy consists in. It is none other than the master theme of Margolis's own philosophy, and which renders a full recovery of Kant both in aesthetics and in philosophy more broadly impossible: historicity. Consider the following:

Hegel changes philosophy fundamentally by historicising it. It's a genuinely grand feat of an unforeseen kind that, to this day, we have hardly mined. Furthermore, historicity is already widely viewed as ineliminable in philosophy in general (hence, in aesthetics) *and* in any minimal grasp of the fine arts and encultured life. If you read my meaning correctly here (and agree), you realise I've just put forward the astonishing claim that both philosophy (for present purposes, aesthetics) and our discourse about the arts and culture in general (also, our reflexive understanding of ourselves) have always been conceptually deficient – from (say) their Parmenidean beginnings to the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth. (That's to say a span of more than two millennia!) You must consider that philosophy was almost completely deprived of what, to our own thought, comes closest to being the principal clue to everything human. (Margolis 2009, 57)

Rather than asserting the poverty of historicism, Margolis is asserting the poverty of philosophy without historicism! What else is astonishing about this passage is that Margolis is clear that historicism is the key to understanding the entirety of the human, that is cultural, world. One cannot have a theory of art without recognising that art takes the form of an utterance of an encultured self where that person/self is likewise itself a history. This is one important clue to how mining Margolis's interpretation of the history of aesthetics leads to the necessity of his insight of the human person as a physically embodied culturally emergent entity. Further, this insight accounts for,

in part, the inadequacy of any aesthetic theory prior to Hegel's historicising of philosophy. Likewise, Margolis's criticisms much of contemporary theory in aesthetics as internally incoherent because of a tendency to treat aesthetic inquiry and the arts in less than thoroughly historicised terms. This is particularly embarrassing, Margolis argues, in Danto's case because the latter professes to be a Hegelian in particular in terms of the end of art thesis and yet his distinction between mere real things and works of art does not heed Hegel's historicist lesson (Margolis 2009, 159). But Danto, Margolis would conjecture, does not provide the best reading of Hegel. Take, as a final piece of evidence of the way in which Margolis's historicism is operative in his reading of the history of philosophy, the following passage from a slightly later essay "The Point of Hegel's Dissatisfaction with Kant" which bears a striking consistency with the way in which Margolis had previously treated the reading of Hegel in *On Aesthetics*.

Put in the most unguarded way, the best reading of Hegel's undertaking (perhaps not always textually perspicuous or interpretively reliable) commits us to the following constraints... that Hegel unconditionally abandons transcendentalism (all a priori assurances of necessity and universality... and that under the constraints of evolving and historied experience, claims of necessity and universality are, wherever pressed, never more than *faute de mieux* contingencies. (Margolis 2012, 9)

That the 'best' reading of Hegel is one that may not always be interpretively reliable as a narrow exegesis of Hegel's thought might strike those with a more conservative approach to the history of philosophy as no different than Rorty's postmodern move. However, a Margolisian reading of Hegel might best capture why Hegel is dissatisfied with Kant (because the latter could not account for experience as both having a history and itself being historied) in a way that a more "faithful" explication of Hegel's texts could not. This is not to suggest that any reading of Hegel (or any other thinker from the history of philosophy) is as good as any other. Interpretations must be adequate to their objects for Margolis even if not restricted to a narrow bivalent logic of interpretation. To deny even an adequational theory of interpretation would be to suggest the sort of facile, self-refuting relativistic interpretation of texts that Margolis was at great pains to show was itself inconsistent with his 'robust relativism'.⁴ Rather, the 'best' reading of the history of philosophy is the one that accords with our own 'best lights'. Having provided something of a sketch of how historicism informed Joseph Margolis's reading and usage of the

⁴ See Margolis 1995, 24-5 for one account of his adequational theory of interpretation.

history of philosophy, the task remains to get clearer on what, exactly, Margolis understood by 'historicism'.

3 What, After All, is Margolisian Historicism?

It should be obvious by now that what Joseph Margolis intended to capture by his use of 'historicism' is not the more commonly held version of the thesis that holds that historicism is a form of historical determinism in the interpretation of events. For example, Popper's grouping of historicism with essentialism could not be more in error for Margolis as historicism is a rejection of any claim to an invariant structure in reality that can come to be known through (transcendental) human reason. Additionally, Margolis is not the first thinker in the pragmatist tradition to take a commitment to historicity as central to pragmatism. Colin Koopman has convincingly argued that historicism, often taking the form of a commitment to meliorism, pervades both the classical pragmatists and the neo-pragmatism such that "meliorism... means taking historicity seriously" where historicity is minimally construed as the claim "that pragmatists understand things as historically situated and temporally conditioned" (Koopman 2010, 690-1). While this is a good starting point in understanding the place of both meliorism and historicism in the cluster of concepts that comprise the family resemblances that are often taken as constituting a commitment to pragmatism, Margolis's formulation of historicism is much more radical than the one that Koopman traces through the classical pragmatists and beyond.

For Margolis, the analysis of historicism begins with the doctrine of historical flux, the claim that the "denial of strict invariances of reason or reality, need not be self-defeating" (Margolis 1993, 117). If reality is a flux, then all of our philosophical concepts would need to be reconciled to that flux. This reconciliation of philosophical concepts to the flux of reality, when that is formulated in a non-self-defeating way, are the minimal conditions that Margolis sets out for any version of historicism. To the two conditions outlined above – that 1) reality is a flux and 2) that our philosophical concepts can be reconciled to the flux in coherent ways – Margolis adds two more conditions – namely that "knowledge is an artifact of history" and that "persons or human selves are artifacts of contingent social history" (1993, 118). Put more forcefully, for Margolis persons "have or are only *histories*" (1993, 120). Thus, 1) if human persons are histories rather than possessing invariant essences, and further 2) the entirety of the cultural world is brought into existence by being the utterance of an encultured human self which is in turn embedded in a broader social and cultural history, then 3) the entirety of the cultural world, including the arts and the sciences, can only be proper-

ly understood through the theoretical auspices of a thoroughgoing historicism. This argument, I hope, lays bare the depth of Margolisan historicism. There is no aspect of human culture, and thereby all our conceptions of reality, that it does not touch. Further, since the Intentional structure of the cultural world makes it irreducible to mere material or physical things, when applied to history, this implies that historical time and physical time need not, and for Margolis are not, identical. History, Margolis claims “has an Intentional structure” (2021, 152) and is thereby essentially interpretable in the same way in which we interpret art and with the same relativistic logic. When this connection is seen it becomes clear why Margolis resisted physicalism and reductionism in any of the domains of philosophical inquiry where it is to be found. Just as the possession of Intentional properties make artworks irreducible to their physically embodying medium, and human persons or selves irreducible to our physical or biological aspects, historical time too is irreducible to physical time. And while the latter might be causally closed such that one cannot reverse physical time, history, because historicised, remains essentially open and interpretable but always, as Margolis would have it, guiding by what counts as the ‘best lights’ of the present. The full excavation of all the implications of Margolis’s historicised theory of the human person, in both his own thought and the reconstructions that it would necessitate in broader areas of contemporary philosophical research, requires a much more detailed study. It is hoped that this articulation of the historicist argument in Margolis’s thought can prove useful in pointing out the direction, however crudely, that those future studies might take.

4 Conclusion

When Margolis claims that the self is a history, he means more than just that the self is conditioned by history and as such is not a timeless essence that by virtue of its rational nature can transcend the bounds of human history, through the study of philosophy, to come to known reality as it is independent of the merely subjective conditions of human experience. It is also to say more than that the self is just a conditioned series of temporal events, a sequence of changes, a narrative, rather than an eternal substance that bridges those events. Of course, he means to suggest both of those points. But more than that, to say that the self is a history is to say that the self, like history and art, has or is an Intentional structure. One cannot separate Margolis’s theory of the human person, his ontology of culture, and his historicism – they are all unified in his thought. This theoretical unification is due to the same Intentional structures, first realised by the transformation of biological members of *Homo Sapi-*

ens into encultured and enlanguaged human selves, being central in the explanation of all three. Further, this shared Intentionality explains both how persons, culture, and history emerge from, and are embodied in, their underlying basal properties and yet as ontological hybrids cannot be reduced to mere physicalist explanations. If one way to think of pragmatism, as a humanism, is through William James's assertion that the trail of the human serpent is over everything, then we might rightly update and modify this pragmatic slogan in a Margolisian vein and claim that the trail of the Intentional is over everything. This paper has argued that an examination of Margolis's reading of the history of philosophy (aesthetics) is one fruitful avenue by which to understand the central roles that historicism and Intentionality hold in all aspects of his thought.

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